

THE
HORNS
OF
RUIN

Tim Akers

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Inquiries should be addressed to
Pyr
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228-2119
VOICE: 716-691-0133
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.PYRSE.COM

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To my own Bloody Jennifer, who fights like a girl

CHAPTER ONE

They came for us one at a time, came to kill the last servants of the dead god Morgan. I had lost brothers and sisters before, to battle or old age. Scions of Morgan die all the time. We're warriors. Now we were going to die in alleyways, in our homes, in crowded theaters and empty hallways. They came to kill us, and we didn't know who they were.

They came for me and Barnabas while we were walking through the city, on our way back to the Strength of Morgan from an errand at the Scholar's prison, the Library Desolate. Well. Mostly they came for Barnabas. I just happened to be there, escorting him. It was me. I'm the girl who let the old man down.

He looked good that morning. Healthy. He always looked better out of the monastery. Those old, empty stone halls did little more than weigh him down. Open air, even the dirty air of a crowded street in the city of Ash, always put a smile on his face. He was smiling that morning. This was before the hidden deaths, before the murders and betrayals. Before we knew what was happening. He was the first one they came for, and we didn't know they were coming. Not yet.

We walked down the road, and the crowd parted for us. Barnabas was in his formal robe, a deep maroon hemmed with gold thread, and carrying the staff of his office. Symbolic armor clattered on his shoulders, and the cuffs of his robe were stamped with golden scale mail that shimmered in the morning light. His knuckles bore the calluses of a life spent fighting and working, the twin paths of the scions of Morgan. White hair and wrinkled face sat on a frame thick with muscle and iron hard. Even in the waning days of our Cult, there was glory in the office of the Fratriarch, and Barnabas Silent looked every inch the part.

As proud as I was, I wished he'd left the formal robe at home. I was

dressed in my battle-day simples. Pride was fine, and glory was better, but both of those things were bought with attention. As the Fratriarch's only guard, I could have done with less attention. Of course, whatever attention I avoided by dressing simply, I gave up with my holster and sheath. But a girl shouldn't go out half dressed.

"It's a matter of state, Eva," Barnabas said, his voice as gentle as mist at the foot of a waterfall.

"I said nothing, my Elder."

"You did," he said, nodding. "In the way you stand, in the movement of your eyes. In the weight of your hand upon your bullistic. You do not wish to be here."

"It's not my fault you like to get dressed up, old man. No, no, I'm happy to be here. Thrilled to be walking through the city with the holiest man I know, just me as a guard. Not like we have any enemies, Barnabas. Not like the Rethari are massing at our borders, or their chameleon spies have been dredged up in the collar countries. No, not at all. This is ideal." I sped up a little to intercept a group of children who had blundered into our path. The Fratriarch smiled and patted their heads as we passed. They stared at us, whispering. "I just wish you'd brought more guards. Maybe an army or two?"

Barnabas watched the children, his face equal parts gentle happiness and melancholy. He turned back to me.

"The Rethari are always massing. It's what they do. And as for their spies? We used to make stew of their spies. Besides, we have no other guards, Eva. It's a matter of state. We go to seek the aid of our godbrother. Only Elders of the Fist and Paladins may attend. Among the Elders, Simeon was busy, Tomas and Elias are napping, and Isabel cannot be more than ten steps from her library, for fear that one of her books go unread."

"I saw Tomas, just before we left."

Barnabas nodded absently. "Yes, yes. Not napping. Tomas does not . . ." He smirked and shrugged. "Tomas will not be involved in this. And of the Paladins, Eva?"

I grimaced and looked around at the passing crowd. A pedigear weaved past us, its clacking engine momentarily drowning out the perfectly good awkward silence.

“You are the last Paladin of the dead god Morgan, Eva. There are no more, and likely never will be,” he said, patting my hand. “I am the Fratriarch, and you are the Paladin. Let us attend to our business.”

He walked off. I sighed and followed.

“Yeah, let’s just make a parade of it. You and me,” I said quietly, adjusting the hang of my revolver at my hip. “Maybe I should have rented an elephant.”

“Elephants don’t belong in cities, Eva,” the Frat said, gesturing broadly to the crowded streets and towering glass buildings all around. “It’s not humane.”

“To the elephant? Or the city?”

He laughed deeply, and I smiled and caught up. In younger years he would have pinched my cheek or patted me on the head, as he had those children. But now he was the Fratriarch and I was the Paladin. We walked side by side through the city of Ash.

“If it’s a matter of state, then we’re going the wrong way. Alexander will be at his throne today, in the Spear of the Brothers.” I pointed across the road. “That way, in case you’ve gotten senile.”

“It is,” Barnabas nodded, “and we are not going there.”

“You said—”

“Morgan had two brothers, Eva. We are going to visit the scions of Amon.”

I stopped walking, frustrating the crowd. Barnabas continued on, nearly disappearing into the throng before I snapped out of my shock.

A whole column of elephants wouldn’t be enough, nor stone walls. Nothing would make me feel safe in the halls of Amon the Betrayer.



Ash is a funny city. Not funny, like rag clowns and puppet shows. Funny like it shouldn’t exist. Funny like it should collapse in on itself in a cloud of shattered glass and burning streets. My kind of funny.

It goes back an Age, back to when the Feyr were the race-ascendant rather than mankind, when the Titans ruled the skies and the earth and the water all around. Before there were people, maybe. I don’t know. But it goes back to the Feyr.

What is today the city of Ash was once the capital city of the Titans. Their throne, their birthplace, a city of temples and totems and grand technology. The name of that city is lost to us, but it nestled in a crater, like a giant bowl of stone sprinkled with buildings and roads and carved riverways. We really don't know why the Titans and the Feyr fought their little war, but they did, and that war came to the city in the crater.

The Feyr were masters of the elements. They made water out of nothing, fire out of air. They could sink mountains and freeze the sun in the sky. That's the story my momma told me, at least. Scratch that. That's the story my nanny told me. So the Feyr came to the crater, to the city of the Titans.

They burned it, then they drowned it. Two deaths for one city. It was enough to win the war, and more than enough to scar the Feyr forever. They filled the crater with a lake of cold, black water, and that lake was choked with the slick ash of the dead city below. It was a wound on the soul of their kingdom, the greatest sin they ever committed. In time they tried to atone. They built temples of wood that floated on the lake of ash, trying to suck the sickness out with their prayers.

And when war came to them, when mankind rose up and named their gods and came marching with swords and totems of their own, this was the last place the Feyr stood. Afterward, mankind made a city on that lake, built up from what was left of the charred temple-rafts of the Feyr. Among the Scholar crafted engines that supported more and more structures, more buildings and roads and people. It became the capital of the Fraterdom, the impossible engines always churning against the lake to keep us dry.

It's a crazy way to build a city. Three hundred years, and that lake is still black as night.



I escorted the Fratriarch into the shadow of the Scholar's ominous prison. The Library Desolate was a dark wound on the city, its stone and steel walls still blackened from the arcane battle that washed across it generations ago. Whenever rain or time cleaned off some portion of

its edifice, the citizens of the city of Ash would gather to ritually scorch the stone black again, as it had been burned when the outraged legions of Morgan descended upon it to slaughter the priesthood of Amon the Betrayer, for the murder of their god. That was a tradition we kept. The roof sprouted a cancerous rash of glass domes, their panes smeared with ash and chipped black paint. The last House of Amon the Betrayer lived in permanent night. The Cults of his brothers Morgan and Alexander saw to it.

We were met at the gate by a servitor of Alexander. Morgan had held this guard a century ago, until our numbers dwindled and the godking Alexander stepped in. He had ordered all records of our time in the prison destroyed. Security, he insisted. As though a scion of Morgan would sell those secrets. As though he couldn't trust the servants of his own brother. Though trust is what got Morgan killed, so I suppose it wasn't without reason.

The servant was a pale man, whiter than his robe, his bald head shinier than the dull silver of the icon around his neck. Not the cream of the crop, here at the prison. He looked us over with lazy interest, then spun up the clockgeist beside him and pulled the speakerphone to his mouth.

"Names?" he asked over the clockgeist's quiet howling clatter. I stepped in front of Barnabas.

"Eva Forge, Paladin of Morgan and sister of the Fraterdom. I demand entry to the house of my brother by my right as scion of Morgan."

He looked up from my breasts, then down to my holster, then up again to the two-handed sword slung over my shoulder.

"You'll have to leave your weapons at the gate."

I sneered and snapped out the revolver, flipped it once in my hand, and spun the cylinder open. I presented the clacking wheel of bullets to him and began to invoke.

"This is Felburn, heart of the hunter, spitting fire of the sky. Morgan blessed the revolver as a weapon of his Cult at the towers of El-Ohah, when the storm cracked the stones of that place and the cannons of his army cracked the sky. This weapon was beaten from the iron of the mountain of the Brothers, the land of their birth. The bul-

lets are engraved with my soul's name, and blessed by the Fratriarch of Morgan on an altar of war." I snapped the cylinder shut, passed the barrel across the pale man's heart, and slammed it into my holster. "I carry it, whether I live or die, through fire and fear and foes. I leave it nowhere."

"Well, I . . . uh." The Alexian grimaced and shuffled his feet. Barnabas leaned out from behind me.

"Don't ask her for the sword," he said, then banged his staff against the narrow stone walls all around. "It's a much longer show, and there's not really enough room for the full production. If we step outside for a moment, though, I'm sure she'll be happy to demonstrate. Eva?"

I reddened and chewed my jaw, then glanced over my shoulder at the old man. He was beaming. He stepped around me and tapped his ceremonial staff to his forehead, like a fisherman hailing a passing boat.

"I'm Barnabas, Fratriarch of Morgan and First Blade of Alexander's dead brother. If you don't know who I am, then you can be damned. I have an appointment."

The color, what little of it there was, left the servitor's face. The clockgeist chewed out an answer that he didn't really hear. He nodded and the gate opened.

The pale-headed man locked the gate behind us, shuttered the cowl on the clockgeist, and escorted us into the library-prison of Amon the Scholar. We followed a long brick tunnel deep into the complex, the way lit by the Alexian's gently humming frictionlamp. There were no other guards, no other gates, but suddenly the tunnel opened up into the mitochondrial complexity of the Library's stacks. We were among the Amonites. I bristled, and the articulated sheath on my back twitched with insectile anticipation, like a spider testing its web. Barnabas sensed the change and put a broad hand on my shoulder.

"Silence," he whispered. "These are the tame ones."

"It's the tame ones I don't trust," I answered, but left my blade where it was and tried to relax.

They moved among the stacks in absolute silence. Their black robes looked like wrinkled shadows, and they kept their heads down. A few paused in their grubbing among the books to turn our way, but the sight of a Paladin of Morgan sent them scurrying.

“They wander around like this?” I asked. The servitor nodded his bald head, though he did not turn to look at me.

“They are bound to this place, my lady. Their books, their equipment. The shrine of their god, fallen though he may be. They would not leave.”

I looked around at the close walls, the wooden ceiling, and the stinking, pulpy stacks of books on their sagging shelves.

“I would. First chance I got.”

“Well. Perhaps they don’t have that, either.” The servitor fingered a loose coil of chain that hung from his belt and chuckled. It looked like a woman’s necklace that had lost its stone. There was carving on the links, but I couldn’t make out the pattern.

“I would prefer *they* wore the chains, servitor,” I said, resting my hand on my revolver. The stacks were narrow and close, like a maze of wood and leather. It felt like an ambush. “Better to have them in cages. If we still ran things, it’d be cages.”

The servitor stopped walking and faced me. The Fratriarch walked another half-dozen steps then idled to a halt. He flicked a hand through a book that was resting on a nearby podium, his eyes distracted. So old, in that moment. He looked like a forgetful grandfather. I pushed the thought aside and faced the servitor. He stared at me with barely veiled contempt. No, not veiled at all. Just contempt.

“In chains, madam? In cages? Tell me, are all the scions of Morgan so nuanced in their approach?” He whipped the coil of thin chain from his belt and held it at shoulder height. “What was the escape rate when Morgan held these halls? Do you know, even?”

I held the smaller man’s gaze, leaving my face as dead as possible. He fingered the chains with idle malice. The Fratriarch ignored us. When it became clear that I wasn’t going to answer, the servitor continued.

“We have had none, my lady. Not one. Chains rust. Cages can be shattered. The bonds of this world fail us. Faith in metal and stone is inevitably faith squandered.” He sneered, his tiny eyes wrinkling over his ugly nose. “You should know that, Morganite.”

I would have struck him, if the Fratriarch hadn’t been there. The flat of my blade or the barrel of my bullistic, he deserved nothing less.

Patience. It was a speech I heard a lot from the Fratriarch. From all the Elders. Patience. I put my hand flat against his chest and prepared to invoke. He grimaced and clenched the chains in his fist, then spat out something arcane. The stacks erupted in screams, all around, echoing between the rows of books like thunder in a canyon.

My sword was in my hands without a thought, the pistons and hinged arms of the articulated sheath pivoting it over my shoulder and into my ready grip. I dropped into a guard position and began invoking Everice, Mountain among Streams. The servitor laughed. The Fratriarch looked on with grim disappointment.

Black-robed Amonites stumbled from the stacks, spilling to the floor in shrieking agony. They writhed at the servitor's feet, their eyes wide with terror and pain. I stared at them in horror, then fascination. The Amonites had chains of their own, thin and flat, made of some dull gray metal and arcanelly etched. Our guide loosened his grip on his chains, and the screaming stopped.

The servitor stood over them, the coil of chains dangling loosely from his open palm. The Amonites lay in a heap, panting and mewling. The room smelled of offal and disgrace.

"Cages rust. Metal fails." He returned the coil to his belt. "We bind the soul, my lady."

He turned and walked away. The Fratriarch looked sadly down at the pile of Scholars. There were old men among them, and children. He gave me a look, then followed the Alexian. I surrendered my sword to its sheath, then left the Amonites to struggle to their feet and disperse. There would be words from Barnabas for that provocation.

"Not my fault he's a jerk," I muttered. He ignored me.

The small corridors and tight stairways continued for a while. I lost track of our turnings, though it felt like we were going higher. Groups of Amonites watched us from the shadows, eyeing the heavily armed woman and the old man with his fancy staff. The servitor they ignored. He hurried ahead of us, opening doors and securing locks. Well, at least they used locks sometimes.

"How did that work?" I asked the Fratriarch as we crossed a broad chamber. I kept my eyes on my feet, only daring to glance quickly over at the still furious Fratriarch. "How did he do that to them?"

Barnabas did not answer immediately. When he did, it was with a deep sigh and a quiet voice. “How does your armor work, student?”

I stumbled to a stop. Student. He had not addressed me in that way since . . . since I was a child. I hurried to catch up.

“Master, I meant no—”

“I asked a question, and I await an answer.”

“I . . . Master. The symbol of the armor is the armor.”

“The idea of the armor, you mean. The soul of the armor,” he corrected. He let out a long sigh and looked around at the dingy walls. His eyes held distaste, even pity. “We draw on the noetic power of Morgan’s armor, and it protects us. We draw on the noetic power of his strength, the greatness of his deeds, the collective memory of his courage.” He waved a dismissive hand. “This is the same. The Healer has built a prison into each of them. Chains would bind the flesh. The noetic power of chains, the memory and symbol of chains, though—that binds their souls.”

I thought about that. It troubled me. The strength of Morgan, his courage and his bravery, his victories in battle—these were the things that gave us our power, our invocations. Each of our powers had its basis in some part of Morgan’s story. Everice, Mountain among Streams, for example, is a defensive stance. When invoked, the scion of Morgan can face multiple threats at once, her attention divided equally in all directions. It draws its power from Morgan’s actions at the Battle of Everice, when his line had been overwhelmed by the Rethari hordes. Morgan had stood alone against waves of scaled Rethari warriors for a full day, striking each of them down with a single blow. To the rest of the army, heavily pressed and unable to relieve their god, Morgan had looked like a mountain in a flood, battered from all sides but unyielding.

I wondered what bit of Alexander’s history the power of the chains came from. Nothing widely known, it would seem. All the gods had their secrets, of course, revealed only to the highest scions. Still, it was a strange power for Alexander the Healer.

“Master Barnabas, I beg forgiveness for my actions. The presence of so many of the Betrayer’s scions—”

“Forget it,” he said wearily, and then smiled. “There is a duty here, and a purpose. These people do not serve Amon the Betrayer.” He

stopped and fixed me with his pale eyes. “He did many things. It is by his hand that this city was raised, and by his servants’ hands that it still stands. His tools drove back the Feyr and forged the Fraterdom. The Betrayal was one act, as horrible as it was. One act. They worship the god that he was. Not the murderer he became.”

“Is that supposed to be enough?” I asked.

“It must be. Amon is dead. Morgan is dead at his hand. Of the three brothers, only Alexander remains. There is nothing more we can do.”

We stared at each other, master and student, elder and orphan. The Fratriarch sighed and turned to the servitor, who was waiting at the foot of a staircase. I followed, as I always follow. The Cult of Morgan was not mine to lead.

We continued in tense silence up a tightly coiling spiral staircase, dusty shelves of books on all sides, until we emerged into a much larger room. The Fratriarch and I stumbled to a halt, wide-eyed.

We were on a broad terrace that was, itself, part of a cavernous space of books and dappled light. This single room was a gash that ran the height of the building, steep walls that stepped outward in terraces and narrow walkways, polished wooden railings and trestles arching across the gap, their paths illuminated by warm frictionlight and, amazingly, the natural sun in delicate patterns. I followed the thin light up to the ceiling. Several of the domes that we had seen outside yawned over this grand chasm, their chipped black paint letting in a bright constellation of sunlight. And everywhere I looked, the walls, the rooms that opened onto the cavern, the walkways that wound treacherously across, all of them were lined with bookcases. They seemed to burst organically from the wood and stone, like strata of musty intellect crushed into gilded pages by the weight of the building.

The servitor hurried to a cabinet by the edge of the terrace. It was a dark wooden contraption with many tiny doors, each one cryptically marked with letters of the Alexians’ secret language. The bald man ran a finger along the cabinet, then snapped open one of the doors and drew out a long wooden dowel, jangling with loops of chain. He looked up and saw us in rapt distraction.

“The Grand Library. Surely there are records of this place in your monastery?”

“The godking had our records burned when his Cult took over the prison a century ago,” Barnabas whispered, then looked at the servitor. “He didn’t trust his brother’s church to hold the secrets.”

“Trusting his brother Amon led to Morgan’s downfall, eh?” the servitor said tersely. “Perhaps Alexander did not wish to make the same mistake.”

I stepped to the bald man and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You should watch your words in the presence of people like me.”

“You should watch your hands on the body of your godking’s servant, woman.”

The Fratriarch placed his staff between us, and we parted. I went to stand by the railing. This guy was getting on my nerves more than he should. Something in the air of this place made me uncomfortable, like a battle shifting under your feet before you can do anything about it. I put my elbows on the railing and stared down into the shelved chasm.

The floor of the library was dark and far away. A bristling forest of frictionlamps cast a ring of dim light around the perimeter, but the center of the floor was a slippery shadow of darkness. That void seemed to writhe with shivering currents. I struggled to focus on that strange expanse. Suddenly there was a disturbance and something smooth and gray rose from the floor. It slid quietly to the edge of the darkness, casting out ripples. I saw a pier, then, and tiny figures casting lines. A depthship, surfacing from the water.

“They have access to the lakeway?” I asked.

“No, no. There are wards. The lake is there for our use.” The servitor shook his head. “They could no more travel it than they could fly out that window. Settle down.”

The city of Ash was unique in the world, in that it floated on a great lake. Ironically, the many fabulous machines, each as large as a country town, that churned and lifted and stabilized the city were the design of Amon the Scholar. In this he had not betrayed his brothers, for those engines still kept the city afloat all these centuries later. But as much of the city lay below water as above it. This submarine section was linked by long passages of steel and stone, known collectively as the lakeway, navigable only by depthships. In places it emerged in underwater chambers, or let out into the black deeps of the lake itself.

To have an open passage to this network in the middle of a prison . . . well. I found it strange.

“I don’t care if you’ve nailed their tongues to the floor, Baldie. I don’t care about your chain tricks or the fact that these bloody book-worms probably can’t even swim. The second we’re out of here I’m filing a motion with the Council to have that ’way sealed and your access suspended until such time—”

“Are you here to add anything of value to these proceedings, or is your sole purpose in this matter to run your mouth and lose your temper and make pointless threats that you have no ability to carry out?” he snapped. He left the open cabinet and stuck one pale, thin finger in my face. “Because I’m beginning to suspect that you’re nothing but a good sword and a great rack!”

“Yeah,” I said, thoughtful. “Yeah. That’s all of your wisdom I’m going to take.”

I flared invocations: the Sundering Stone, the Wall of the World, Hunter’s Heart. My sword was in my hands, bleeding light and smoke and fire. The Alexian took a step back, and his form was fraying at the edges as he chanted the defensive invocations of the Healer. Barnabas stepped between us, then cracked me across the head with his staff. My invocations dropped.

“Child,” he said, and nothing more. Over his shoulder, the servitor of Alexander looked on with amusement. I returned the sword to the tiny, clasping hands of the sheath and took a stance of meditation.

“You should teach your children better, Fratriarch. A servant of Alexander knows his place in the presence of Elders.” The servitor whipped his hands and the invocation fell, his body snapping back to wholeness like a spring. Barnabas rounded on him.

“A servant of Alexander should know his place,” he snarled. He poked the pale man in the sternum with the staff. “Wet nurse, or bed maid, or hearth servant.” Poke. “Not provoking the scions of Morgan.” The Fratriarch crowded the servitor, stepping in too close and then following him as he retreated. “God of War. Champion of the Field. Heart of the Hunter. Do you understand?”

“That woman is . . . she is—”

“She is a warrior, an anointed Paladin, a scion of Morgan. She is a

dangerous person.” He put an old hand against the servitor’s chest and gave him a slow, powerful push. The pale man stumbled back. “As are we all, dangerous people.”

The servitor trembled against the cabinet, staring at the Fratriarch. He looked between us, then picked up the chained dowel that had tumbled from his hand.

“We have business, Fratriarch. There’s no need for this to get complicated.”

“It always is, servitor,” Barnabas said. His voice was tired. “It always is.”

The bald man scowled but returned to the cabinet. He fingered the dowel, then unclasped a length of chain and handed it to Barnabas.

“Some of the chains express an aura of restraint, drawing on the souls of any who have been bound. We use those for crowd control. Other sets are attuned to specific individuals. Since your request was for a single subject, this is probably the best.”

Barnabas took the chain. It was a narrow loop, not more than six inches in loose diameter. He twined it around his fingers and squinted. “How does it . . . Ah.” The old man looked disoriented for a moment. Startled, I stepped forward and put a protective hand on his elbow. Slowly he regained his bearings. He looked at the servitor. “You didn’t have to hurt them at all, did you?”

The bald man shrugged.

“Well, where is he?” Barnabas looked around, then stopped. “She. Yes, I see. Like this.”

He raised the chain, his fist clenching around the flat, dull links. A figure rose from a table on a nearby terrace and crossed over to join us. She was a young woman, a girl really. The dark robes of the Cult of Amon hung loosely on her frame, but she had her hood down. Her hair stuck out in thick, black curls, startling against her pale skin. She kept her eyes lowered. The chains that hung around her shoulders looked very new.

“A child? Did our request not stress the importance of our need?” Barnabas asked.

“This one is . . . gifted. Unique. Have faith in Alexander, my friends.”

“My knee will bend to him, sir,” I said, “but my faith belongs to Morgan.”

The servitor shrugged again, laughter dancing in his eyes. “As you say. If this girl will not serve, I’m sure we could reprocess your request. It would take some weeks, of course.”

“Don’t toy with us, Healer.” I looked the Amonite up and down. A pretty thing, if frail. Battle would break her. “What’s your name?”

“Cassandra,” the girl said. Her voice was quiet.

“You can incant the histories of Amon? The rites of the Scholar?” Barnabas asked.

The girl looked between us, then raised her arms and locked her fists together in front of her small breasts. Her voice, when it rolled into the quiet of the Grand Library, was a different creature from the timid ghost that had given her name as Cassandra. It was rich, resonant, touching in the deep places of my mind. The words spoke of stress lines and inertia, gear periods and energy reserves. It was the language of clockwork, the language of machines and engines arcane. It had a rhythm to it, smooth, churning, driving forward from beneath my skin and through my bones to a peak of momentum and mass and energy.

“Hold,” Barnabas barked, and the girl stopped. I came out of a stupor I hadn’t realized I was in. The room was changed. A table by the cabinet was disassembled, the old form cut away into gears and chains of wood. It was some sort of machine now, clockworks and cranks and long pistons of polished maple that gleamed in the half-light of the glass domes above. A gentle cloud of sawdust hung in the air around us.

“Do you see, now, the futility of locks, Lady Paladin?” the servitor asked. I stared at the wreckage of the newly made engine.

“What’s it for?”

The girl shrugged. “It goes around,” she said. “It is an engine merely for the sake of engineering.”

“We’ve seen enough,” the Fratriarch said. “She will do.”

Our departure had none of the idle tension that marked our arrival. The servitor chatted happily with the Fratriarch as we made our way through the book-hemmed labyrinth. I walked beside the girl Cassandra, my hand on my revolver.

“So, what is the purpose of your request, Frat Barnabas?” the servitor asked. “One hundred years, the Cult of Morgan doesn’t step foot in the Library Desolate, and suddenly you make a request for one of our guests. Some project, I assume?”

“What business is it of yours? She will be returned to your charge, brother.”

“As you say. Though, to be honest, with your companion I wouldn’t be so sure. Small matter to me. I love the Amonites no more than you do. A matter of curiosity, is all.”

“Then curiosity it must remain.” Barnabas folded his hands at his waist, indicating resolve. The subtlety of his action was lost on the servitor.

“Plumbing trouble, perhaps? The Chamber of the Fist is hip deep in used toilet water, eh?” The servitor beamed and chuckled. He looked back at me. “We have plumbers in the city of Ash, you know. No need to deal with the folk of Amon for that.”

“As much as I appreciate the assistance of the godking in this matter, I’m afraid our reasons must remain our own,” the Fratriarch said.

“Have the scions of Morgan so lost faith in his brother Alexander, then?”

“As you said,” Barnabas stopped and turned to the bald man, “it was faith in our brother Amon that cost Morgan his life. And gained Alexander a throne.”

The servitor smiled stiffly, then nodded and led us out.