



The Basilisk Plot

by
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For Yvonne. As always.

1

Arcadis clutched the throbbing white bundle to his chest and streaked toward Earth, a long and dangerous journey, even for an angel. *Why does it vibrate so?* he wondered yet again, and again he shuddered to think what might be concealed inside the shimmering cloth. It had belonged to Elek; it must be sinister.

Elek.

Arcadis had first met him on the day Elek was annihilated. He knew about him long before, of course. Everyone on Praxmir knew about Elek: how he was posted to Earth and fell in love with a human woman; about their forbidden relations and the son born to them; how Elek was banished from Praxmir for all eternity. And yet, at the end that's where he came, stumbling back to his home world and collapsing on the Gathering Lawn just as evening songs were ending. Arcadis could still

remember his first glimpse of the rogue angel, battered from some fierce battle, but defiant to the end.

“Michael,” Elek had gasped. “Michael. Protect Michael.”

He had said it over and over again, and even though Arcadis had never experienced pain, he could feel pain throb from the convulsing angel each time he rasped the word. *Michael.*

And Arcadis had felt something else that day for the first time in his life: fear.

The blur of time that followed Elek’s reappearance on Praxmir—in human terms it was no more than a few hours—wrenched Arcadis from a peaceful, cultivated paradise and hurled him toward the most remote and dangerous sector of the universe, Earth. Even now, more than twenty-nine human days after leaving his home, Arcadis felt confused and disoriented. It had all happened so fast.

The Elders had crowded around Elek and sworn to protect Michael, but by then Elek’s life was nearly gone. “Elshon discovered,” he gasped. “Basilisk has it.” He struggled to speak, desperate to make himself understood. “Basilisk has it.... Will overwhelm Earth. Stop him!” The tormented angel’s mind dissolved in a fevered rush of disjointed fears. “Beware. Basilisk.... Beware.... Aid. Domus.... Michael.”

And then he was gone. Annihilated, perhaps forever.

Elshon discovered. That alone would have created panic. The Elshon: humans fathered by angels. Powerful weapons if they fell into the enemy's hands. Had the demons discovered them all, Arcadis wondered, or was Michael the only one in danger? And who was this Basilisk, and what did he have that was so powerful it could overwhelm the earth? Who was Domus, and was he aiding the Basilisk, or were the Elders of

Praxmir to aid him? Questions and more questions troubling the angel's mind as he hurled through the darkness.

The Elders had called together all the angels of Praxmir—the entire Bode—and hurried to fulfill their vow. True, Elek had been banished in disgrace, but Elek was one of theirs, and Michael was his son, and that made Michael one of their Bode. The Bode was their family—more than that, it was their extended *body*—and so Michael must be protected. Arcadis had heartily nodded agreement with the rest but then regretted it when the lot fell to him.

"I know nothing about fighting," he had argued. "I'm the least likely to protect Michael." Still, the Bode's Overseer had drawn him apart from the others and surrounded him with light.

"Go, Arcadis, in the name of the All-Highest and with the blessings of your Bode."

So he had gone.

Now, twenty-nine earth days later, he picked his way through the craggy mountain peaks that formed the Range of Separation, the border between Earth's sector and the rest of the universe. The Range was invisible to humans, of course, who could experience only the dimensions called Tertia. But to Arcadis, aligned with the dimensions of Primus—the dimensions of angels and demons—the rugged peaks were clearly visible, roiling around him like a restless black sea, buffeted by a moaning, frigid wind that seemed to warn him not to enter this sector lightly.

Arcadis threaded his way through the craggy range, often correcting his course to keep the distant blue star in sight until, after many more days, the mountains fell away abruptly and the angel emerged into a vast

blackness, a dark bowl rimmed by jagged mountain edges. At the very center of the bowl, lit as though from within, spun the delicate blue sphere that was his destination: Earth.

Mysterious. Forbidding.

And for now, thought Arcadis with a shudder, *my home*.

2

Michael sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the sapphire blue sphere shimmering in the center of his room. "What do you mean, 'annihilated'?" he asked. "What does that mean? Is Elek dead? How can an angel die?"

Arcadis struggled to find the right words. He had no idea how to express sympathy to a human. On Praxmir he would have sung a song, one he had written for the bereaved, but now he felt helpless. He took a deep breath. "Annihilation is the equivalent of human death." There. He had said it.

Michael rubbed his eyes then looked up frowning. "How can angels die?"

"Technically, of course," said Arcadis, "Elek wasn't an Angel. He was a Dominion. Much higher in rank than a common angel,..." His voice trailed off under Michael's suddenly fierce look, and they sat in prickly

silence for several minutes. “Tell me about your father,” Arcadis ventured at last. “In my world we like to remember those who—who are no longer with us.”

Michael winced. “I didn’t know he could die. Why didn’t he tell me?” His cheeks flared deep crimson. “There were so many things he never told me!”

Arcadis watched Michael anxiously. How did humans react to death? Some creatures died of grief. Were humans like that, he wondered?

The boy didn’t look like he was going to die right now. He was upset, but he looked healthy enough. Extremely healthy, in fact, by Earth’s standards. After Arcadis had cleared the Range of Separation he had aligned himself with Tertia—the dimension of humans—and scanned the planet’s inhabitants as he approached. Michael, he could see, stood out among his kind. He was well-muscled and strikingly handsome. His hair was just unruly enough to be charming and the color of Golden Flox at harvest. Just the sight of it made Arcadis long to stand again in a field of the grain and watch the wind press it down and then release it to spring up again. The eyes that stared back at Arcadis were as blue as the Pools of Certhor (the truest blue in all creation). Every feature pointed to one fact: Michael was an angel’s son.

“I first saw Elek when I was six,” said Michael huskily. “My mother always told me he ran away before I was born; ‘Probably ran off with some whore,’ is how she always said it.”

Arcadis frowned, though Michael saw nothing more than a quick darkening of the perfect blue sphere suspended in mid-air.

“She didn’t know that he was still around,” continued Michael. “He didn’t visit too often, and always when I was alone, of course. He didn’t

want anyone else to see him. That very first time I saw him he told me he was an angel. I thought it was cool.” Michael flashed a disarming smile and his cheeks reddened. "I was only six." Then he lapsed into frowning silence once more.

Arcadis struggled to keep the conversation going. “So you weren't surprised to see me. You're used to seeing angels.”

Michael shrugged. “Elek never let angels and demons get very close to me; they just look like lights and shadows." He scratched his head. “I always thought that if they got up close I'd be able to see them clearly, the way I could see him. But you're right in front of me and you're still just a ball of light.”

“You saw him clearly?” asked Arcadis sharply. “He looked human to you?”

“Of course.”

“Elek looked like flesh and blood,” whispered Arcadis. He thought about the mysterious bundle he had carried from Praxmir and quickly laid the silken package on the floor anxious to be rid of his burden.

Michael saw it appear suddenly in front of him.

“It was Elek's,” said Arcadis. “I'm sure he meant it for you.” *Though I am doubtless breaking every rule of heaven to give it to you*, he thought. Arcadis could keep it of course. *That might be the right thing to do*. As suddenly as the thought sprang up Arcadis squelched it. “Open it,” he said aloud, and he was not quite able to keep his voice from shaking.

Michael picked up the bundle and turned it over several times before finding an edge of cloth that he could pull free. It was pearly white fabric as heavy as burlap but smooth and shiny as silk. Michael peeled it away in one long continuous layer and let it fall to the floor until he exposed a

gold disk dangling from a sturdy gold chain. Michael held the chain up and the disk swung gently at the level of his eyes.

The gold disk was a little larger than a nickel and twice as thick. A vertical window, wider at the bottom and narrowing toward the top, pierced the front, its edges framed by tiny bands of braided gold. The disk spun slowly and suddenly caught the light so that through the vertical window Michael saw a red stone, blazing like a miniature sun.

“Flame Star,” gasped Arcadis, and his voiced sounded suddenly tense. “Able to be worn without touching the skin.”

Michael could see what he meant. The front of the disk, with its flared window, was actually a hinged cover that could be pivoted away to expose the stone. Closed, though, it prevented the stone from being touched. “Why wouldn’t you want the stone to touch—?” Michael looked up and the question died in his throat.

The sphere that was Arcadis had boiled apart and gathered into a rumbling cloud, his crystalline blue swallowed in terrible darkness. A smoky tentacle broke away and snaked toward the gem in Michael’s hand. “Flame Star is not for humans!”

Instinctively, Michael snatched the chain out of reach.

Blackness swallowed the room and the rumble deepened. The thunderous mass swirled around Michael, shrouding him in darkness, and his eardrums throbbed under the inaudible bass of the angel’s anger. Michael’s skin prickled and he rolled to the floor, shielding the disk under his body, braced for an attack. For a moment the darkness pressed tight around him and then, suddenly, Michael felt it withdraw and hover a few feet above him.

“Hide it,” snapped Arcadis. “Get it out of my sight. Some mysteries

were never meant to see the light of day!”

With a roar that shook the room the darkness vanished.

Michael lay trembling on the floor for several minutes and then sat up slowly, his heart still beating in his throat. He was alone once more. He stared at the golden disk’s fiery core, afraid to touch it, unwilling to let this reminder of his father go. Its red light flickered like a glowing ember, firing Michael’s anger. *Why had Elek told him so little? Why had his father never even hinted that angels could die? Who was going to protect him from demons now that Elek was gone? Who would protect him from Arcadis?!*

For a long time he glared at the stone, wavering between desire to know its secrets and anger at the one who had left it to him; the father who had bequeathed him too many mysteries and too few answers.

The stone seemed to glare back, mysterious and mute, its dazzling light unable to penetrate Michael’s confusion.

3

“Dude! Did you see the way she looked at you?”

Michael ignored his friend and kept walking toward the end of the mall where he had parked the car, but Tyler spun around and walked backwards. “She’s gorgeous! Why don’t you at least look?”

“Because I only care how Jenny looks,” said Michael. He shot a sideways glance at Tyler and grinned. “Besides, how do you know she was looking at me? Maybe she was looking at you.”

Tyler laughed and caught pace with the taller boy again. “Right.” He swept his long brown hair out of his eyes and pushed his glasses up from where they had slid down his nose. “Let’s see.... Maybe she was looking at the geeky kid with the Coke bottle glasses and size ten feet, or maybe

she was drooling over the guy who is six inches taller and looks like a model....”

Michael knew he was handsome; it came of being the son of an angel. His best friend was a gawky teenager who grew in spurts, feet and arms charging ahead without waiting for the rest of the body to catch up.

“Yep,” concluded Tyler sarcastically. “I think you’re right. She was flirting with me.”

“Hey, you never know,” said Michael. “Maybe she goes for the brainy type. You definitely have me beat on that score.” Sometimes Michael was tempted to take advantage of the girls who fawned on him, or even of the adults who favored him over kids like Tyler. But it wasn’t too hard to stay humble. Michael’s mother saw to that. It was the one thing he could count on her for. More importantly, Elek taught him that his physical appearance was a thin crust masking something much more substantial and important: his neuma; his spiritual body. The physical body would corrode and one day fall off to reveal the eternal body underneath. Michael sometimes wondered whether his spiritual body looked anywhere as good as his physical body.

He glanced at the girl who had passed them. She was certainly gorgeous, but if he concentrated he could just make out her neuma, shrunken and shriveled up like an old crone. It was probably dead; a spiritual corpse being carted around on the back of a beautiful hearse. “You don’t want that girl, Ty. She doesn’t have the character you want.”

Tyler sighed. “You’re probably right, but it wouldn’t matter if she was perfect for me. I don’t have the option of being as picky as you.” He smiled, but he couldn’t keep the envy out of his voice. “You could have any girl you want.”

“I only want Jen,” said Michael.

“What time does she get back?” asked Tyler. For the last month Michael’s girlfriend and a team from their church had built a school in a remote valley of the Andes Mountains.

“I’m picking her up at eight o’clock.” Michael looked at his watch. “That gives me about an hour to drop you somewhere before I have to head to the airport. Sixteen-year-old drivers can only have one other person in the car who’s under eighteen, remember.”

“And I’m sure that’s the only reason you want to dump me before eight,” said Tyler with a grin. He rubbed his chin. “You know...I haven’t seen Jenny in four weeks, either. Maybe I should drive over to the airport and meet her too.”

Michael punched Tyler’s arm and then darted out of reach. The shorter boy lunged for his friend and the two sparred all the way to the parking lot.



“Where are you going?” asked Arcadis.

Michael had stopped at home to change his shirt and was surprised to find the angel waiting for him. It was the first time he had seen him in nearly a week, since the day he brought news of Elek’s death.

“To the airport to pick up my girlfriend. She’s flying back from Chile. It’s a country on the other side of Earth.”

“Oh, thank heavens.” Arcadis sounded relieved. “So humans *can* fly. I was beginning to think you could only get around on your legs and in those noisy machines.”

“No—I don’t mean that *she* is flying. She’s in a machine that flies. People can’t fly.”

Arcadis grunted. “So you *are* limited to your legs and those machines.”

“Pretty much. Yes.”

“Primitive,” muttered the angel.

Michael shook his head and turned toward the door. “Maybe I’ll see you later.”

“Wait!” said Arcadis. “I have to come too. I’m supposed to protect you.”

Michael stopped with his hand on the doorknob. “Protect me from what?”

Arcadis hesitated. “It’s—well, I’m not really sure. I’ll have to tell you the whole story.”

“Not now,” said Michael throwing open the door. “I’m going to get Jen. We can talk later.”

“But this is important,” protested Arcadis. “You’re in some sort of danger. There’s some demonic plot going on and someone may be trying to kill you. We need to talk about it now.”

“If it was so almighty important why didn’t you tell me the first day you saw me?” snapped Michael. “It can’t be that important. You’ve been gone a week!” Michael had never seen enough of Elek, and a small part of him hoped that Arcadis might stay and answer the million questions boiling inside him; questions about angels and what it meant to be one of them, if only partly. But Arcadis had abandoned him just like Elek.

The shimmering sphere—glowing gold today—shrank a little and spoke plaintively. “I had to spend some time away. I didn’t realize how

greatly I would be tempted by the Flame Star. I nearly attacked you to get it. I shouldn't have been surprised; I've never known a temptation in my whole life. We don't have temptations on Praxmir. I just didn't realize how easily...." His voice trailed off.

Michael unconsciously touched the disk under his shirt. He had worn Elek's chain constantly for a week. He looked at his watch. "I'd love to hear more about this Flame Star, or whatever you call it, but I'm late and I don't want you tagging along right now. We'll talk later." He hurried to his car hoping Arcadis would leave him alone. Angels, he knew, were taught deep respect for humans. Sure enough, the angel didn't follow him.

Memories of Elek distracted Michael as he drove to the airport. He wondered whether he could ever entrust his secret to Jenny; for now, it was his alone. Tyler didn't know. For that matter, even his mother didn't know that the father of her child was not human. Their romance was brief but, as she put it, 'very intense.' They had never married, and her puritanical father had thrown her out of the house when he discovered she was pregnant. Michael's mother had grown bitter over time and then she had become something far worse: cynical. She pretended to believe nothing, to care about nothing. She couldn't quite pull off the charade without a little assistance from—.

Michael stomped the brake and spun the wheel. The back of the car fishtailed and he nearly clipped the car ahead. He shook his head to clear it. Now wasn't the time to get distracted and wreck the car. He was about to see Jenny for the first time in four weeks. She was the opposite of his mother: cheerful; honest; gentle. She brought out the best in him. Definitely the opposite of his mother.

He spun his rickety Toyota into a parking space and sprinted for the terminal. In a few minutes he would see her. He only wished he could tell her about the most important thing that had happened while she was away. But Elek's death was his secret to bear alone.



“Now I *know* where you're taking me,” said Jenny. “I've been craving vegetable enchiladas for four weeks! You wouldn't believe some of the things I ate this summer.”

The traffic light turned red as they approached the corner of Douglas and Main, one block from their favorite Mexican restaurant. It was dusky now, but to Michael the streets glowed as they hadn't glowed for a month.

“I knew that would be the first thing you wanted,” he said.

“Well, not the very first thing,” teased Jenny. She leaned over and kissed him.

The streets were nearly deserted. A lone, heavysset man stood on the sidewalk in front of Clinton's Hardware Store combing his thin mustache with one hand, his navy sport coat stretched over his paunch and held there by dint of a single, overstrained button. The flag in front of the library snapped in the breeze and Jenny reached for the temperature controls.

“Don't tell me you're cold. In *July*,” laughed Michael.

“I probably just need to scoot closer,” said Jenny. She leaned over and kissed him again just as the light flashed green.

Michael pressed the accelerator, saw the heavysset man wave a hand to flag someone down, then glimpsed the speeding car beyond Jenny one

instant before a dozen sledgehammers seemed to slam the Toyota. Steel exploded against steel. The world around Michael blasted into fragments of glass shrapnel. Jenny screamed. Michael smelled smoke; tasted metal on his tongue, then blood. Blood everywhere.

Nothing but red. Darkness and red.

The explosions evaporated into eerie silence.

Nothing.

4

“You understand, Mr. Wayde, that you have waived your right to a jury trial?”

Michael nodded at the judge.

She tucked her head down and glared at him over her half-rim glasses. “I’m sorry? I didn’t hear you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Michael quietly. “I understand.” He didn’t really understand. He didn’t remember waiving his right to a jury, but Michael’s court-appointed lawyer had stuck so many forms in front of his face, he wasn’t sure what he and his mother had signed.

“And you understand, also, that my decisions have the same force as if this were a formal trial?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The judge consulted the precisely organized stack of papers on the desk in front of her. “You are charged with reckless endangerment and failure to yield the right of way, both of which are misdemeanors at this point.” She glowered over her reading glasses again, her eyes like black seas floating beneath a towering iceberg of hair. “You do understand that there will be additional charges if Ms. Winslow should die?”

Michael winced. A picture of Jenny rose in his mind, her face and arms swollen with purplish green bruises against the crisp hospital sheets, wires strung from her arms and head like anchor lines, machines blipping every few seconds to indicate—what? Brain activity? The doctor wasn’t sure. He couldn’t be sure until she came out of the coma. *If she came out. Please, God. Let her wake up and be normal.* It was the same prayer over and over. Nine days. *Please, God.*

“Mr. Wayde?” The judge’s sharp call brought Michael back to the hearing room.

“Yes, ma’am,” he whispered. “I understand.” If Jenny died there wouldn’t be anything the court could do to add to his punishment.

The judge studied her notes again.

Arcadis hovered uneasily, a faint blue orb perched just above her shoulder. *She’s turning the pages too fast,* groused the angel, his voice audible only to Michael. *I’m still learning to read this language!*

“I understand you are unable to afford legal counsel and a public defender has been appointed to represent you in this matter?” It was more of a statement than a question and the judge accepted Michael’s nod without reprimand this time.

“Your honor?”

The judge looked sharply at the man who now stood up behind Michael. “What?”

“Your honor, I’m Reverend Gunn, Michael’s pastor.” Andy Gunn was a powerfully-built man with gentle brown eyes; today they looked uncharacteristically clouded and his mouth was drawn back in a tight line. “I don’t mean to interrupt, your honor, but Michael’s church has hired a lawyer for him.” He glanced toward the closed door at the back of the room. “She should have been here by now.”

Michael’s mother was seated to his right with her arm around her son’s broad shoulders. Now he felt her stiffen. She hadn’t wanted the church’s “charity” and refused to let the lawyer in the house for a week. Now the lawyer was missing and Cheryl Wayde was sure to let Michael know what she thought of the church’s promises.

“If we could just wait a few minutes,” said Gunn, “I’m sure she’ll be here.”

Judge Cottrell pursed her lips. “My court does not wait for tardy attorneys, Reverend.” She waved him back to his seat and nodded toward the man seated to Michael’s left. “Mr. Glavitz, is it? You have been appointed to represent Mr. Wayde?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Fine. How does your client plead?”

Jarrold Glavitz looked at Michael. “Last chance to reconsider,” he said under his breath.

Michael didn’t like the lawyer. They had met only once and Glavitz had spent the entire hour urging Michael to accept responsibility for the accident, even if it wasn’t his fault. “No,” said Michael through clenched teeth.

The attorney shrugged and faced Judge Cottrell once more. “Your honor, my client pleads not guilty.”

The judge nodded. “Let the plea be entered in the record.”

A bald man to the judge’s left tapped at his stenotype machine.

The judge shifted her attention to the table five feet to Michael’s left. The driver of the other car, a middle-aged woman who had escaped the wreck with only a few bruises, sat stiff-backed between two lawyers in well-tailored suits.

Arcadis hovered above Michael’s head. *I caught a few words in the papers the judge is reading, and they don’t look like they’re true*, he said.

Michael tried to ignore the distraction. The next moment, though, he heard a deep rasping sound, like the rattle in a dying man’s throat, and a shadow floated into the room.

Arcadis rumbled deeply, like a lion warning away a rival.

I see you have a new nursemaid, rasped the shadowy figure, as though dredging each word from a brackish pool at the bottom of his throat. He oozed to within two feet of the judge’s desk, a smoky mass, surrounded by small buzzing creatures, that seemed to absorb all the light in the room into its own darkness. *The attorney from your church is sitting by the side of the road with two flat tires. You haven’t got enough power on your side to even get her across town.*

Michael felt despair shroud his soul. He was used to seeing the shadowy forms of demons, but never this close. Worse, the spirit’s taunt echoed Michael’s own doubts: was God too weak to stop what was happening? His attorney shut out of the courtroom. The accident itself.

The chaotic mass floated toward Arcadis. *Learn the name Ravid*, said the ghoul. *You will come to fear me.*

Not likely, growled Arcadis.

“You are Faye Morgan?” asked Judge Cottrell and, in response to the woman’s nod, “Would you please describe the accident?”

Listen closely, croaked Ravid. *You will be amused by her story.*

The middle-aged woman brushed back her mane of blond hair and looked in Michael’s direction.

She’s going to lie, isn’t she? gasped Arcadis.

Welcome to Earth, angel-wimp, scoffed Ravid, *where truth is what you make it.* He suddenly threw himself at Arcadis, hissing. Arcadis recoiled from the unexpected attack, but Ravid veered off at the last instant. He swept to the far end of Faye Morgan’s table, trailed by his buzzing swarm.

Arcadis bellowed and took up a position halfway between Michael and Ravid. It didn’t make Michael feel very secure. He had seen Arcadis flinch at Ravid’s feint. Elek had always kept demons away from Michael. Now Elek was gone, and the angel sent to replace him was apparently a coward. Michael groaned and tried to focus on his accuser.

“As I’m sure you can see from the police report, your honor,” said Faye Morgan, sounding annoyed, as though the judge should know her story already, “I was driving north on Douglas Street on the evening of July 28. I had worked late that night....”

Michael studied Faye. It was the first time he had seen her up close. He remembered glimpsing her hair in the instant before her car hit his. A mass of blond; the kind that came out of a bottle, Jen would say. Ms. Morgan was clearly too old to have such blond hair. It stopped just above the collar of her business suit, as smartly tailored as her lawyers’ suits and, like theirs, black pinstripe. Obviously expensive. Her jewelry looked expensive too: a ruby or emerald on nearly every finger, large

diamonds dangling from each ear. She was slim, as though she worked out regularly, and her voice was as cool and confident as the cut of her suit.

“...the traffic signal was green in my direction.”

Faye’s words startled Michael out of his trance. “No it wasn’t!” he blurted.

“Mr. Wayde!” scolded Judge Cottrell.

“But—.”

“You will have opportunity to tell your side of the story in due course. In the meantime, please maintain silence.” The judge glared at him until he swallowed his protest, then she stared a moment longer. “Go on, Ms. Morgan,” she said at last.

The light wasn’t green in her direction, said Arcadis. She’s lying.

Ravid’s shadow loomed up from behind the lawyer. *How do you know it’s not the truth? he taunted. You weren’t there. Remember?*

Michael told me what happened! seethed Arcadis. The woman is lying.

Maybe Michael lied, said Ravid.

Impossible, snapped Arcadis. He is a follower of the Most High; he does not lie.

Ravid’s breathing became more ragged, as though he might be laughing. *You have a lot to learn about the Children of Dust, angel-wimp!*

Just shut up! thought Michael, but neither could hear his thoughts.

“I came through the intersection—I had a clear right-of-way—and that boy ignored the red light in his direction. Of course, I hit him; it was impossible to stop. My car is nearly totaled. I expect this court to see that justice is done.”

The judge stared over her glasses at the woman as though trying to see inside her. “Do you have any witnesses?”

To Michael’s surprise one of Faye’s slick attorneys stood up. “Yes, your honor. There was one witness to the accident.”

I thought there weren’t any witnesses? said Arcadis.

Ravid snarled with wicked pleasure. *Think again!*

Judge Cottrell scanned the courtroom over her glasses. “Where is this witness?”

“Unfortunately, your honor, the witness is out of the country at the moment.”

The judge sniffed.

“If it please the court,” purred the lawyer, “I have a document from the United States Department of Defense explaining that his absence is due to military necessity and could not be rearranged.” He flourished a document that looked densely official then handed it to the judge. “Doctor Whittaker was standing on the corner of Douglas and Main. From there he could see the accident clearly.”

Michael vaguely remembered the burly man with the thin mustache.

“In light of Doctor Whittaker’s necessary absence,” said the lawyer, handing another document to the judge, “defense counsel and I took a deposition jointly.” He nodded at Glavitz, who nodded in agreement.

Michael gripped the arms of his chair and hissed in his lawyer’s ear. “You never told me there was a witness!” Glavitz stared straight ahead and refused to meet Michael’s eye.

The judge glanced at the document. “Would you care to summarize the deposition?”

“Doctor Whittaker’s testimony substantiates that of my client, your honor. The young man ran the red light.”

Judge Cottrell looked at Glavitz. “Do you agree with counsel’s summary?”

“Yes, your honor.”

Michael was stunned. Nothing had prepared him for this. The court-appointed lawyer had said nothing about a witness, certainly not a witness who would contradict Michael’s version of the accident! He rubbed the back of his head as though trying to massage away the doubt that was creeping in around the edges of his memory. Why didn’t he remember the accident the way everyone else did? Had he been so wrapped up in Jen that he ignored the light? The hearing room buzzed around him like the dark creatures swarming Ravid.

The rest of the hearing unfolded like a nightmare. Michael told his version of the accident, but when he finished the judge asked him no questions. She turned to Mr. Glavitz.

“Do you have anything further to add on behalf of your client?”

“I can only ask the mercy of the court, your honor,” said Mr. Glavitz half-heartedly.

The judge turned to Faye Morgan. “Do you have anything further to add?”

The lawyer to Faye’s left stood up. “Your honor, I think the court should be aware that the young man’s insurance is inadequate to cover the cost of my client’s car.”

Michael’s cheeks burned. He had carried the best insurance he could afford, but it wasn’t nearly enough to replace Faye Morgan’s BMW.

“It is true,” continued the attorney, “that my client is an executive at Taggart Industries; she can absorb the loss.”

Michael could see that the judge was impressed. Taggart was a major company—and probably a donor to the judge’s election campaigns. His heart sank a little more.

“Despite her position, though,” added the lawyer with an oily smile, “I believe the law should be impartial to the disparate economic circumstances of the two parties.”

“I understand your point,” said the judge. “The court will consider your comments in—.” She hesitated.

Out of the corner of his eye Michael saw Andy Gunn standing again.

“What is it now, Reverend?” sighed the judge.

The pastor didn’t flinch. “Your honor, I would like to say something on Michael’s behalf.” He stepped over and placed his large hands on Michael’s shoulders. “Michael has been a member of our church for four years now. I’ve watched him grow and develop into a fine young man. What has happened is a terrible thing, something that could happen to anyone. It was an accident. I hope you’ll take that into consideration too.” He patted Michael’s shoulder and sat down.

The judge took off her glasses and nodded, then she spoke in clipped tones, without emotion. “It is the opinion of this court that Michael Wayde failed to yield the right of way and recklessly endangered the life of his passenger, Jennifer Winslow, and that of Faye Morgan, on the night of July 28. Mr. Wayde. Please approach the bench.” She followed him with her eyes until he stood in front of her desk and looked up. “I am revoking your driver’s license for one year and ordering you to perform one hundred hours of community service. In addition, you will

develop a plan, acceptable to Ms. Morgan's attorneys, for reimbursing her for any costs not covered by your insurance."

Michael groaned inwardly. He wondered how many lawns he would have to mow to pay off a fifty-thousand dollar car. He thought too, about how his mother would yell about this. Every dollar that went to Faye Morgan was a dollar out of their own pockets.

Ravid shot toward Michael trailing his noisy swarm, though he stopped short when Arcadis lunged to Michael's side. *You believe God is all-powerful, right?* scoffed the demon, his voice thick and bitter. *But he couldn't prevent this accident from happening, could he? Or maybe he didn't want to? Maybe he doesn't really care what happens to you, dust boy. That's what you are to him. Just dust. You're made from dirt, remember? Something to be walked on until it's time to clean house.*

"This hearing is ended." The judge's voice brought Michael back to attention. "Mr. Wayde," she added flatly, "understand, please, that we will reconvene and consider additional punishment in the event that Ms. Winslow should die from her injuries."

"Yes, ma'am," whispered Michael.

Ravid's swarm of buzzing creatures left the demon to surround Michael, who watched Arcadis try without much success to drive them off. Ravid's rasping howls of glee filled Michael's ears, echoing the confusion in his mind: Could he have caused the accident after all? How would he be able to live with himself if Jen died or if she woke up and wasn't normal? The thoughts were too much to bear. And the thought that Arcadis was his only protection from demons seemed almost as grim.

5

“That accident was no accident!” said Arcadis. “You’ve got to see that!”

“Let it go, Arcadis,” sighed Michael.

“Ravid showed up at the hearing. He knows all about the accident. It was planned—and he had a part in it.”

“Demons always show up,” snapped Michael. “Only, now I don’t have Elek to keep them away from me!”

Arcadis fell silent and Michael knew the jibe had stung. “It’s not your fault that Ravid showed up,” he said. “Just don’t draw any dramatic conclusions from it. The accident was just that: an accident.” Still, Michael wondered why? Why had God let them wreck? Was Michael being punished for something? “It was an accident,” he repeated, trying to reassure himself.

Arcadis's light drew itself into a solid, fiery pillar at the center of the room. "It was no accident. You need to listen to me. It's time you hear what I know."

Michael's resistance crumbled and he sank to the floor with his back against the bed. He was still numb from what had happened at the hearing. His mother had screamed at him during the drive home then fled to her bedroom with a full bottle. Whisky, probably. It was her current drink of choice.

"Until the day he was annihilated," said Arcadis, "I knew Elek only from the stories—well, from rumors, to be honest. You might as well know the truth."

Michael didn't respond. He was barely listening.

"He left Praxmir before I was created and wandered through the universe for hundreds of thousands of parteks. And then he did something no one from our planet had ever done before: he *volunteered* to be assigned to Earth." Arcadis was clearly astounded.

Michael looked up at him and frowned. "So what's wrong with that?"

"Earth is conquered territory," explained Arcadis. "All of it is occupied by the enemy. Most angels live on home worlds that are paradises; Earth isn't someplace we yearn to see."

Michael switched his gaze back to his tattered black sneakers.

"Many parteks went by and then rumors reached us that Elek and several other angels had fallen in love with Children of Dust—human women." He spoke thickly, as though struggling to speak. "Our Bode was shocked at the disgrace, of course—."

Michael flared up. “Who are you to judge my father? You don’t know one thing about resisting temptation! You saw one little glimpse of that stone and nearly attacked me for it!”

“Nearly attacking,” said Arcadis evenly “is not the same thing as attacking.”

Michael snorted.

“I won’t judge your father,” said Arcadis. “What he saw in your mother was for his heart alone, I’m sure.”

“She wasn’t like this when he met her,” said Michael quietly. “Try to remember that.”

“I’m sure,” said Arcadis. He paused, and for a few minutes they sat in uncomfortable silence until Arcadis took up the story again. “In any case, the news of your birth reached us along with rumors of several others.”

Michael looked up again. “The other angels had children too?”

“At least three or four of you—maybe more—all born within weeks of one another. Among the angels you are known as the Elshon: The Bright Circle. Each of you has an angel father and a human mother.”

“I never realized there might be others,” said Michael. “Where are they?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be allowed to tell you,” said Arcadis, and Michael felt a familiar rage surge in his breast at being shut off from facts that might make sense of his life.

“By having sex with a human,” continued Arcadis, “Elek broke one of the Intrinsic—the fundamental principles of the universe; no celestial being is permitted intimacy with a human. He was banished from Praxmir forever, of course, and that is the last we heard of him until the

day he appeared at home. He had been attacked; he was dying. He wouldn't have risked returning if he had not been dying."

"Why?"

"The penalty would have been severe," said Arcadis simply. "I knew him as soon as I saw him. He was obviously part of our Bode, but no one from Praxmir looked that much like a warrior; I knew it had to be Elek."

A little flame of pride flared inside Michael's chest.

Arcadis recounted Elek's last moments: how the wounded Dominion made the Elders swear to protect Michael; his mysterious warning about the Basilisk's plot. "He pressed the bundle containing the Flame Star into my hands and then he died," concluded Arcadis. "Of course," he added, "the Elders didn't suspect what was in that bundle or they never would have let it leave Praxmir, you can be sure."

"What's so important about the Flame Star? Who killed Elek? What's the Basilisk? Why does it matter if someone knows that I'm Elshon?" Michael was bursting with questions.

"One question at a time, please" said Arcadis. "I'm told that humans grasp things more readily that way."

Michael pulled himself to his feet then went and leaned against the window frame for a minute before answering. Through the screened window he watched the August heat shimmer off the driveway blacktop. A lawnmower droned from several houses away. Heat and humidity pressed against Michael until his black tee shirt stuck to his body and he thought he might suffocate. The heavy silence was broken suddenly by thumps from downstairs and Michael winced. He didn't want to think what that might mean. He tugged the front of his shirt away from his

chest and turned around to face Arcadis. “Okay. First question. Who is the Basilisk, and why is he a danger?”

Arcadis hesitated. “I don’t know exactly. I assume he’s a demon. If he’s the one who killed Elek, then he’s a very *powerful* demon.”

“And you think he’s after me now?”

“Elek insisted that you need protection. The Basilisk must be after you.”

“But why?” asked Michael.

“Maybe he hated Elek and wants to kill Elek’s son. Or maybe it’s because you’re Elshon.”

“I don’t get it,” said Michael. “What’s so important about being Elshon?”

“The Elshon are able to see things that no human can see,” said Arcadis. “Some followers of Christ can *sense* demonic or angelic activity, I’m told, but you can actually *see* them.”

“Not very well,” said Michael.

“Not yet,” muttered Arcadis. “In any case,” he said more loudly, “you could use that power to discover the plans of the enemy and warn the followers of Christ. You have great potential as a weapon. Of course,” he added, “that weapon could work in either direction. You could choose to use your power to *hurt* God’s people instead of help them, and the enemy is very, very aware of that fact.”

“That’s why no one’s allowed to know who we are?”

“Yes,” said Arcadis. “For your protection. The angels are forbidden to reveal your identity. I don’t know how the Usurpers found out about you.”

“The Usurpers?”

“It’s what we call the demons; they’ve usurped God’s authority on this planet. And now they’ve discovered your identity. The Basilisk, whoever he is, is trying to kill you.”

“Elek said he was plotting to overwhelm the earth,” said Michael. “That doesn’t mean he’s trying to single me out and kill me.”

“Don’t you see?” said Arcadis. “If he’s trying to destroy the earth, then the only people who can stop him are the Elshon. You’re the only ones who can see into both Tertia and Primus. The Basilisk is trying to kill you. That’s what Elek was trying to warn us about. And that,” he added briskly, “is why this accident was no accident. It was planned.”

Michael bristled at the reminder of the accident. “It was an *accident*, Arcadis. No one planned it. These things happen on Earth all the time.”

“Then why did Faye Morgan run the red light to hit you?”

“She says she didn’t,” shot back Michael. “And she has a witness to prove it.”

Arcadis snorted. “The witness lied.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you told me what happened. I believe you.”

Michael stared out the window again. “I don’t know what to believe anymore. I thought I knew exactly what happened, but now I’m not so sure. Everyone else seems to remember things differently. Maybe I did run the light.”

At that moment a violent crash shattered the stillness and Michael’s mother shouted an obscenity. Michael sprinted to the door and darted down the steps in three leaps.

Tyler was standing at the foot of the stairs, just inside the front door, looking toward the kitchen, his eyes round with fear, glass shards

scattered around his feet. Michael's mother was half crouched in the kitchen doorway brandishing two heavy bottles full of dark liquid. Just before Michael reached the foot of the stairs she heaved one. Tyler ducked. The bottle narrowly missed his head and shattered against the wall, spraying its contents over his face and shoulder.

“Get out of my house, you scum!” she screamed, her speech slurred. “Go sit in your church ’n sing—or whatev’r you do. Just leave Michael alone, you hear?!”

6

“STOP!”

At Michael’s shout his mother’s arm froze in midair; she squinted toward him, trying to focus her bleary eyes.

Michael’s throat tightened and the familiar feeling of rage rose in his chest. He leaped the space between them, grabbed her wrist, and squeezed until she squealed and dropped the bottle.

“You hurt me!”

Michael kicked the unbroken bottle across the kitchen floor. “Go to your room!” he shouted. He felt like an angry parent yelling at a five-year-old, but he knew it was the only way to get through to her muddled brain. “Get back to your room!”

“I don’t want to go,” she pouted. She thrust her head toward him suddenly and cursed him loudly. The words hit Michael like a gut-punch

and before he could stop himself he stepped toward her and swore back even louder.

A crooked grin twisted his mother's face and he knew she had baited him, had done it on purpose in front of Tyler. The smile faded. "You hurt me," she sulked, then she turned and shuffled away.

Michael stared after her until he heard the click of her bedroom door; even then he watched the closed door for a long time without turning around. "I'm sorry," he said huskily, finally daring to look at Tyler.

Tyler was still pressed back against the wall near the front door.

Michael rooted through debris on the kitchen counter until he found a towel. He handed it to his friend, then sank onto the threadbare couch and buried his head in his hands. "I'm sorry, Ty. That's why I never ask you to come here. I've told you what she's like when she's drunk." He looked up in time to see Tyler take a deep breath.

"It's okay," said Tyler. "Don't worry about it."

"Get me out of here," said Michael. "Just take me someplace away from here."

Tyler nodded and scurried out the door.

"*I'm going too,*" said Arcadis. He swept over to Michael, who glanced toward the bedroom door. "*She's okay,*" said the angel. "*Already asleep.*"

"Where do you want to go?" asked Tyler as soon as Michael had settled into the car.

"Anywhere. Just get me away from here." As Tyler backed the car out of the drive, though, Michael had a sudden thought. "Take me to the police station. My car is in the impound lot there, but they told me I could see it today. I left my sweats in the trunk of the car."

As they drove Michael apologized again. “I can’t control my tongue sometimes when she’s like that. I’m sorry.”

“Forget it,” said Tyler. “You think I don’t ever swear when I get mad? Nobody expects you to be perfect.”

“*She* does,” said Michael. “She tries to get me to do things that she knows I shouldn’t do as a Christian—like cuss her out—and then she tells me that’s why she’s not a believer, because I can’t get it right.”

“She’s only doing that to give herself an excuse not to believe,” said Tyler. “She knows the truth of what you’re really like, even if you aren’t perfect.”

“It’s hard sometimes, Ty,” said Michael. “I’m just sorry you had to see it.”

“I may not survive the shock,” said Tyler with mock horror that made Michael laugh.

At the police station Michael showed his school I.D. to the officer at the front desk. The burly man jabbed a thumb over his left shoulder toward a battered metal door. “Through that door and ask for Margaret. She’ll take you out back.” He nodded toward Tyler. “He can’t go. Only the people who own the stuff in the lot.”

“I’ll wait in the car,” said Tyler.

Margaret was a skeletal woman whose mouth appeared to have fossilized in a rigid line. She led Michael across a parking lot to a weed-covered stretch of blacktop that was fenced off with chain link and razor wire. A camera perched on the cornice of the building watched their approach, its tiny green light winking on and off in a regular, steady gaze. Margaret tugged open the gate and waved vaguely toward the right.

“Car’s down there,” she said without moving her lips, then she turned and marched off without a backward glance.

“Poor woman,” said Arcadis seriously.

“What?”

“I don’t think she can smile. The muscles you use for that don’t seem to work on her face.”

Michael laughed. “Yeah. That probably explains it.”

A moment later Michael winced at the sight of his car. He could hear the shattering metal and glass again. A dark stain on the front seat roiled his stomach. Blood. Jenny’s blood. He turned away, feeling sick. For a few minutes he looked around the junk strewn lot seeing only blood everywhere he looked. At last, though, his mind cleared and the scattered pieces of metal and automobiles came back into focus. “Faye Morgan’s car,” he said, pointing at a black BMW sitting ten feet away.

Arcadis floated over to the wreck and Michael followed. “It’s pretty beat up,” said Michael, pointing to the battered front end. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Arcadis’s globe suddenly flare red.

“Look inside,” said the angel, his voice tense. “On the floor.”

“What?”

“Just go look!” insisted Arcadis.

Michael circled the car and peered through each window but the tinted glass kept him from seeing anything. He tugged open the nearest door.

“Not that one,” hissed Arcadis. “On the floor. Behind where the driver sits.”

Michael pulled open the back door. Something glinted on the plush tan carpet behind the driver's seat. He held it up and squinted at it in the sunlight.

It was a silver pin, about the size of a quarter. Michael frowned at the figure carved on its face. It was an animal, shown in profile, but it was unlike any animal Michael had ever seen: It had the head of a red rooster, but its body curved into the form of a coiling black snake. Serrated wings, like a dragon's, sprouted from the snake's back.

"What is it?" asked Michael. When Arcadis didn't answer right away he looked up and saw the angel's light blazing with a red fierceness he had not seen before. "What is it?" Michael repeated.

"A basilisk."

7

“I’m convinced,” said Michael. “Faye meant to kill me.”

Tyler had dropped him at the hospital and now Michael was huddled with Arcadis in Jen’s room, speaking just loudly enough to be heard over the occasional blip of a monitor. Every once in a while Michael stole a glance at the bruised figure in the bed. *Please, Lord, let her wake up. Let her be normal.* He couldn’t stand to think what he would do if the answer was No.

“The Basilisk is after you and Faye is working for him,” said Arcadis.

“How does a demon get a human to work for him?” asked Michael.

“He could possess her and take over her body,” said Arcadis. “Or he might just tempt her—put the idea in her mind. There are all kinds of ways. Maybe she doesn’t even know he’s using her. Maybe he used her to cause the accident and then planted the pin in her car to let you know

that he was behind it. None of that matters, though. The important thing is that we figure out how to hide you.”

“Hide me? Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t hide from demons. Besides”—and Michael couldn’t quite keep the sarcasm out of his voice—“that’s what you’re here for, remember? You’re supposed to protect me.”

Arcadis’s glow dimmed noticeably. “I’m trying, but I’m not a fighter. I have to hide you. It’s the only way to protect you.”

“It’s impossible,” said Michael. “Forget it.”

“There is one way,” said Arcadis slowly. “I could hide you in plain sight....”

“How?”

“The Flame Star.”

Michael was still wearing Elek’s disk, though he hadn’t thought much about the stone in the chaos of the accident and its aftermath. “How can the Flame Star hide me?” he asked.

“First you need to understand the difference between Tertia and Primus,” said Arcadis. “Since you’re human, you live in a collection of dimensions called Tertia. There are thousands of dimensions in this universe. Most of them you can’t measure—and you never will be able to. That’s one of the Intrinsic: You can’t discover dimensions you’re not equipped to live in.”

Michael’s mind wandered a bit. This was too much like science. Not his best subject.

“Angels and demons live in a different set of dimensions called Primus. We’re all around you all the time, but of course you can’t see us because humans can’t comprehend anything in the Primus dimensions.”

“But I can see you,” said Michael. “I mean, sort of.” Arcadis’s spherical form glowed today like a rare emerald.

“Yes,” said Arcadis. “*You* can. That’s because you are part angel, so you can comprehend some of the dimensions that mere humans cannot. But even *you* can’t see all the dimensions of Primus, so you only see us as vague forms.”

“But I know from the Bible that there are times when humans have seen angels,” said Michael. “They usually looked human, like Elek did.”

“And that’s where the Flame Star comes in,” said Arcadis. “Angels and demons can be visible in Tertia, but only if they have Flame Star. They have to wear Flame Star to look human.”

A monitor beeped again but for once Michael didn’t notice. For the first time he was getting answers to questions that plagued him. “So that’s why I could always see my father? Because he wore the Flame Star?”

“Yes,” said Arcadis. “That’s what made him look human to you. If he hadn’t worn the Flame Star he would have looked like light, just as you see me now.”

“So the Flame Star makes an angel look human,” mused Michael.

“It can make a demon look human, too,” said Arcadis darkly. “That’s another reason the Basilisk might want to kill you.”

Michael had a sudden thought. “Why don’t you wear it, then?” he asked. “I’ll give you Elek’s Flame Star and then I’d be able to see you.”

The green light in front of Michael’s eyes flared suddenly into lurid red flame, casting Jenny’s arms into blood red shadow. Michael threw up his arms at the sudden blast. The sphere flashed darkly and darted to the other side of the hospital room. “Get away from me!” snarled Arcadis,

and Michael shied away at the sudden ruthlessness in the angel's voice. "Do not speak to me of taking the Flame Star. Do you understand?!"

Michael sat without moving, heart pounding at Arcadis's sudden anger, afraid to take his eyes off the red glow. Slowly the fiery color faded into its former emerald hue, and when Arcadis spoke his voice was quieter, though it sounded strained and barely controlled.

"Don't speak of it again. The Flame Star is not mine; I cannot even *touch* it. The temptation is too great. You must see that!"

"I don't see," said Michael. He wasn't easily intimidated, but Arcadis's sudden change in temper frightened him.

"It is forbidden for an angel to *take* a Flame Star. Only the most favored angels are permitted to walk among the fiery stones, and even then the Flame Star must be *granted*, not taken. If you give me the Flame Star I'll be tempted to keep it; to use it. It's not mine! To take it would be a horrible sin."

"So how did Elek get the stone?" asked Michael with a sinking heart. "Did he break another rule?"

"I don't know. The stone may have been granted to him, but it obviously wasn't so that he could have forbidden relations with a human."

The silence hung heavy for a few minutes and Michael wondered for the hundredth time what had happened to Elek. Had he simply been annihilated, wiped out of existence forever? Or worse, had he been sent to Hell to be tormented for his crimes? Either answer made Michael's stomach churn.

"Elek is not the point right now," said Arcadis quietly. "The Flame Star is an incredibly rare and powerful stone. Since you are part angel,

you could wear the disk and as long as you had it open to expose the stone it would render everything in Primus comprehensible to you—and you to it.”

“What do you mean?” asked Michael.

“If *you* wore the Flame Star,” said Arcadis, “I would look human to you—all the angels, and even the Usurpers, would look human to you. We would appear to have arms and legs, appear to walk and sit and do all the things humans do; you would see cities and fortresses in Primus. It would all look like things you know and understand. More importantly, though, you would look like an angel to us. In Primus even the Usurpers would see you as an angel. They wouldn’t recognize you as Elshon. They wouldn’t know you are human. That’s the point. You would be safe there.”

“So I really could hide from them,” said Michael.

“Yes,” said Arcadis, excitement mounting in his voice. “You understand, then. Simply by wearing Elek’s disk you could hide from the Usurpers right under their own noses. It would keep you safe. You would disappear from Tertia, so they wouldn’t be able to find you here—”

“Wait a minute. What do you mean I would disappear from Tertia? From Earth, you mean?”

“You wouldn’t actually *leave* the earth. You would be living in a set of dimensions invisible to humans. No one in Tertia would be able to see you.”

Michael snorted. “Right. You can forget it. There’s no way I’m disappearing from Earth with Jen in this condition, my mother in her condition....”

“It’s the only way,” pleaded Arcadis. “I can’t protect you otherwise.”

Michael looked over at Jen. Someone was trying to kill him and she had gotten in the way. That's why she was hovering between life and death. It was his fault. The burden of guilt that had threatened to suffocate him for two weeks smothered him again. Maybe it would be better for her if Michael disappeared. For a while, at least.

"I can't protect *her* if you stay here," nudged Arcadis, clearly reading the struggle in Michael's face. "At least come to Primus and hide there until I figure out what to do."

Michael considered: His mother wouldn't notice if he left for a couple of days. And what if the Basilisk tracked him to the hospital? That would put Jen in more danger. "Alright," he said. "I'll go."

"Good," sighed Arcadis.

"But only for a day or two."

"What if we can't come up with a plan to protect you in that time?"

"Look, Arcadis," groaned Michael, "I can't run forever. The only way to be safe is to find out who this Basilisk character is and get him off my back."

"It's not so easy to get a demon off your back," muttered Arcadis. "Especially with someone like me fighting for you."

"I'm not saying we fight him right now," said Michael, "but I can't hide forever. We need to find out what this Basilisk character is up to and who else is working for him. We know that Faye Morgan is tied up with him, but—." Michael snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute...." He grinned over at Arcadis. "I know where to start."

"What?" asked Arcadis suspiciously. "Why are you looking like that?"

"Faye is the key!" said Michael. "I should have thought of that before."

“What about it?” asked Arcadis, his voice still thick with suspicion.

“I’m going to go to work for her.”

“What?!”

“The judge said I had to perform one hundred hours of community service. Well, I think I feel so badly about wrecking Faye’s car that I won’t be able to sleep unless the judge lets me perform those hours at Taggert Industries.”

“You’re crazy!” gasped Arcadis. “You can’t go into Taggert. If Faye is involved in some plot to kill you it will be like locking yourself in the lion’s den!”

“It’s perfect,” said Michael.

“It’s a bad plan,” argued Arcadis. “Getting inside Taggert Industries isn’t going to get you any information about the Basilisk. Faye isn’t going to walk around talking about it.”

“No,” agreed Michael, “but getting inside increases my chances of learning something. It beats doing nothing. If we don’t find the Basilisk and stop him I’ll never be safe and Faye is the only known link to him right now.”

“They’ll never let you do your community service at Taggert,” said Arcadis. “It’s not really community service if it’s for a private company, is it? Besides, Faye won’t let you near her if she’s got something to hide.”

Michael laughed. “If Faye is part of the plot to kill me she’ll move heaven and earth to make sure the judge sees my request as community service. Thanks for pointing that out, though. I’ll remember to copy Faye on my letter to the judge.”

Arcadis sputtered but Michael waved him away. “I agreed to go to Primus first. If we can’t settle the issue there, though, I’m going to go to work at Taggert.”

“We’ll find the solution in Primus,” said Arcadis hopefully.

Michael held up the Flame Star. “So, I flip this cover around to the back and the stone will put me in the Primus dimensions?”

“Yes,” said Arcadis, “but don’t do it yet. You can’t leave from here. I think you return to the same place you left. We don’t know who might be in this room when you suddenly reappear.”

Michael imagined Jen’s parents or Tyler fainting when he unexpectedly appeared at the foot of Jen’s bed.

“Your bedroom is probably the safest place,” said Arcadis. “We’ll travel from there.”

“Let’s go,” said Michael. He was tired of feeling helpless. “At least in Primus we’ll be *doing* something.”

“You can’t go yet,” said Arcadis firmly. “I need to scout it out first.”

“But—”

“I’ve not even been to Earth’s Primus yet,” interrupted Arcadis. “I need to see if it’s safe.”

“I’m not afraid, Arcadis,” snapped Michael.

“That’s because you don’t know enough to be afraid.”

Michael glowered at the green sphere and imagined the angel glowering back.

“If I go alone I might be able to find the Overseer—the head angel—and find out who this Basilisk is,” said Arcadis. “Meet me at your house in two hours and then we’ll go together.”

Michael nodded reluctant agreement.

“Promise me you won’t do anything until I get back,” said Arcadis.

“You’re like a mother hen! Just go!”

The angel growled, but slowly his light faded from the sterile room.

Michael dragged a hard plastic chair up toward the head of Jen’s bed and slumped down. Arcadis was a wimp. Michael remembered how he had flinched when Ravid darted at him in the courtroom. Still, the room felt colder without Arcadis’s glow. It smelled worse too; like pain splashed with antiseptic. Michael swallowed against the burning of it in his throat. He stared at Jen’s face for any sign of movement and listened to the monotonous *beep* of the monitors until he thought the repeated noise might drill a tunnel through his brain, then he grabbed the remote and clicked on the TV.

The next instant all thought of Jen and the beeping monitors evaporated.

The mother of Ashley Jensen says she refuses to give up on her daughter, who disappeared while on her way to soccer practice more than a month ago.

Michael could hardly hear the announcer’s voice for the sudden drumming in his own ears. He stared at the picture of the stunning brunette, dressed casually in a blue and white striped blouse, open at the neck. The missing girl seemed to be laughing at the camera, or was she mocking Michael with her smile? He stared, unable to wrench his eyes from her neck. At her throat hung a familiar-looking gold disk with an intricately worked opening, narrow at the top, flared at the bottom. Through it Michael saw a gleam of fiery red. Flame Star.

Another Elshon had been discovered.

8

Michael sprang from the plastic seat. Ashley Jensen was one of the Elshon; the disk at her neck proved that. That meant her disappearance was no coincidence. His own life wasn't the only one in danger; all the Elshon were being stalked. He ran the three blocks home. His mother's car wasn't in the drive, so he burst through the front door shouting.

“Arcadis!”

No answer.

“Arcadis!!”

Michael's room was empty. He sank onto his bed and looked at his watch. Arcadis had left him only thirty minutes before. An hour and a half to wait. He pulled the Flame Star from under his shirt and fingered it nervously. Should he wait? What if the Basilisk already had Ashley's Flame Star and was disguised as a human? He and Arcadis might be wasting their time in Primus. Arcadis needed to know.

The fiery stone gleamed tantalizingly beneath its gold cover. Michael stood up and held the disk gingerly, then in one quick motion he twisted the cover around to the back of the disk and dropped it back inside his tee shirt. He gasped at the searing pain where the stone struck his skin, and he might have snatched the Star away, but the next instant his bright bedroom vanished and he was standing in a dim, low room.



Michael massaged his chest where the now-cool stone had burned and tried to make sense of his surroundings. He was in a room about twice as wide as his bedroom with walls and floor of stone. A simple rug, woven from coarse brown fibers, covered most of the floor. Half a dozen niches gouged in the walls held orange clay fire pots whose flames danced, stirred by a cool breeze whispering through a jagged hole in one corner of the ceiling. Judging from the sliver of sky visible through the gash it might have been late afternoon on a cloudy day, but little light reached inside, and the quiet room was full of shadowy motion.

Straight ahead a sturdy wooden door hung in the craggy wall, secured shut by a stout crossbeam. The warm light and bolted door gave the windowless room an aura of safety. Michael relaxed slightly and looked around. To his right a ponderous wooden table sat surrounded by eight wooden armchairs. On the wall beyond, a row of pegs held an odd assortment of clothes: several gray cloaks, a heavy helmet the color of fresh blood, and a coat or tunic of the same unsettling shade. Michael turned around to see what was behind him.

He froze.

Six feet away was an eagle so huge—so much bigger than anything Michael had ever even imagined—it took his breath away. Its talons were wrapped around a perch thicker than Michael’s leg, each talon sharpened to a stiletto-like point. The perch rose only a few inches off the floor, but still the warlike bird stood as tall as Michael.

For a long time Michael held his breath and tried to calm his hammering heart, certain that at any moment the ghastly creature would open its eyes and fall on him with its razor sharp claws. The eagle was light golden from the top of its head, along the length of its massive body, right down to the tip of its tail, where it deepened to reddish brown. The talons stood out garishly yellow against the pale alabaster body, an obvious warning to anyone foolish enough to challenge the bird.

After what seemed an eternity the eagle hadn’t moved a muscle. Michael let his breath out slowly and laughed off his skittishness. A statue. It was lifelike, certainly, but that was the only explanation for a bird so out of proportion to its actual size. *Well*, thought Michael, *if someone put it here to scare people they did a good job.*

He wondered whether Arcadis had been fooled by the statue, and the thought of the angel brought him back to the reason he was there. He needed to find Arcadis and warn him about Ashley’s disappearance. He turned around and raced for the door, but as he lifted off the sturdy crossbeam that held the door closed, a sudden noise behind him made Michael spin around.

He flattened himself against the rough door.

The giant eagle was flexing its wings so that their tips brushed against the stone wall on either side of the room. His talons tightened around the log-sized perch, then he raise his colossal head and opened his eyes.

The next moment the bird screeched horribly and threw himself at Michael.