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THE NEW SNOW LAY DEEP and undisturbed beneath the silver light of a dawning sky. Overhead, a raven surveyed a silent landscape as its black wings feathered the cold, thin air. The bird's rasping call was the only sound to be heard for miles, breaking the frozen solitude in irregular staccato. All around, the land lay asleep in the depths of winter.

Every bear, every fox, hare, and squirrel was warm in its rustic nest. Cattle and horses stood contented in their stalls, heads drooping in slumber, or quietly munching the first of the day's provender. In the country, smoke drifted from peasant huts into the windless sky from rough-hewn chimneys, sent aloft from hearth fires tended through the night. The village, clustered close about the mighty walls of Askelon Castle, slept in pristine splendor, a princess safe in the arms of her protector.

All through the land nothing moved, nothing stirred, save the raven wheeling slowly overhead.

QUENTIN LAY SHIVERING IN HIS cell, a huddled ball topped by a thin woolen blanket which he clasped tightly around his ears in a resolute effort to keep out the night chill. He had been awake, and cold, long before the sullen sky showed its drab gray through the lone slit of a window high up in his cell. Now the gloom had receded sufficiently to make out the dim outlines of the simple objects that furnished his bare apartment.

Next to the straw pallet where he slept stood a sturdy oaken stool, made by the hand of a local peasant. A table of the same craft stood against the wall opposite his bed, containing

his few personal articles: a clay bowl for his supper, a candle in a wooden holder, a small bell for his prayers, and a parchment scroll on which was written all the rules and observances of his acolyte's office and which, after almost three years, Quentin was still struggling to memorize.

From somewhere in the inner recesses of the temple the chime of a bell sounded. Quentin groaned, then jumped up in bed, pulling the blanket around his shoulders. Today was the day, he remembered. The day of a great change. He wondered what it would be, for as closely as he had followed the portents he could not guess it.

All the omens had pointed to a change: the ring around the moon for three nights before the snow, the storm itself coming on his name day, a spider he'd seen busily constructing a web across his door (although that had been some time ago, he hadn't forgotten).

There was no doubt—a change was forecast.

Its exact nature remained a mystery, but such was often the pleasure of the gods to leave part of the prophecy hidden. He had at last deduced the date of the change by a dream in which he had climbed a high mountain and then had leaped from its very pinnacle and sailed out into space, not falling but flying. Flying dreams were always lucky. His lucky day was always a holy day and this day, the feast of Kamali—admittedly a minor holy day—was nevertheless the first holy day to have fallen since his dream.

Today, without question, was the eventful day; the tokens were indisputable. Quentin reviewed them in his mind as he hurriedly threw his coarse, heavy acolyte's robe over his head of close-cropped brown hair. He stuffed his feet into baggy stockings and laced the thongs of his sandals around them tightly. Then, grabbing his prayer bell, he dashed out of the cubicle and into the dark, chilly corridor beyond.

Quentin was half-way down the high-arched passageway when another bell sounded. A deep resonant peal rang out in three short intervals. A brief pause. And then three again. Quentin puzzled the meaning of this bell; he had not heard it before that he could remember.

Suddenly it came to him. Alarm!

He stopped, confused. As he turned to run toward the sound of the bell he collided blindly with the round, fully padded form of Biorkis, one of the elder priests.

"Oof, lad!" cried the priest good-naturedly. "No need for panic."

"That was the alarm bell just now!" cried Quentin, inching around the puffing priest. "We must hurry!"

"No need. The servants of Ariel do not run. Besides," he added with a wink, "that was a summons bell. Not the alarm." Quentin suddenly felt very foolish. He felt his face coloring; his eyes sought the stone flagging at his feet. The jovial priest placed a heavy arm on his young shoulders. "Come, we will see what drags us from our warm slumbers so early on this chill morning."

The two moved off down the corridor together and shortly came to the vast entrance hall of the temple. A cold, stinging wind was rushing through the huge open doors at the entrance. A priest in a scarlet cassock, one of the order of temple guards, was already pulling the giant wooden doors closed. Three other priests stood round a large, shapeless bundle lying at their feet on the floor. Whatever it was, the dark bundle, uncertain in the dim morning light, had been recently dragged in from the outdoors—a trail of snow attested to the fact, as did the snow-encrusted bundle itself.

Closer, Quentin saw the bundle was that of a human form wrapped heavily against the cold. The priests were now bending over the inert shape which to all appearances seemed dead. Biorkis placed a warning hand on Quentin's arm and stepped slowly forward.

"What is this, good brothers? A wayward pilgrim early to the shrine?"

"This is no pilgrim by the look of him," said the guard, rubbing his hands to restore the warmth. "More likely a beggar for our feastday orts."

"Then he shall have them," replied Biorkis.

"He is past nourishment," observed Izash, the eldest priest of the temple whose symbol of office was a long braided beard.

"Or, he very soon will be, I fear." He tapped his sacred white rod and stirred the air in front of him, indicating that the man should be turned over the better to see his face.

Two junior priests knelt over the lifeless form and gingerly tugged at the wider part of the bundle which formed the man's shoulders. The priests, overly careful not to defile themselves lest they should find themselves touching a dead body, ineffectually jerked at the corners of the rough fur skins the man wore for warmth. Biorkis watched the timid struggle with impatience, finally exploding, "Get out of the way! I'm not afraid of Azrael; my hands have touched worse!" He stooped over the body and rolled it into his arms.

Quentin, moving around the perimeter for a better look, gasped at the sight. The man's face was ashen white and his lips, pressed together in a thin line, were blue. He appeared completely frozen. But even as Quentin looked on fearfully the man's gray eyelids flickered. Biorkis, noticing the remnant of life, ordered one of the junior priests away. "Bring wine, brother. Hurry! And a vial of unction." And to the rest he directed, "Here, now! Help me loosen his wraps. We may pull him back from Heoth yet."

The priests fell upon the motionless figure, carefully unwrapping the layers of clothing. Their astonishment showed visibly in their faces when they had finished, and in the face of the priest who had just then returned with the wine and unguent.

There on the floor before them lay a knight in rude battle dress. His head was encased in a leather helm with criss-crossed bands of iron. His torso carried a breastplate of the same make and material, but studded with short spikes, and his forearms and shins were sheathed in studded guards.

Biorkis, still holding the man's head, tugged at the strap fastening the helmet. It rolled free, clanking upon the stone floor, and a murmur went up from those surrounding. Quentin looked away. The knight's head was a mass of blood. An open wound gaped just over his temple where skin and bone had been crushed by a sharp blow.