



ANGELEON CIRCLE
BOOK ONE

BREATH OF ANGEL

A NOVEL

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HENLEY



WATERBROOK
PRESS

BREATH OF ANGEL
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

ISBN 978-0-307-73012-1
ISBN 978-0-307-73013-8 (electronic)

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Cover design by **{to come}**

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
{to come}

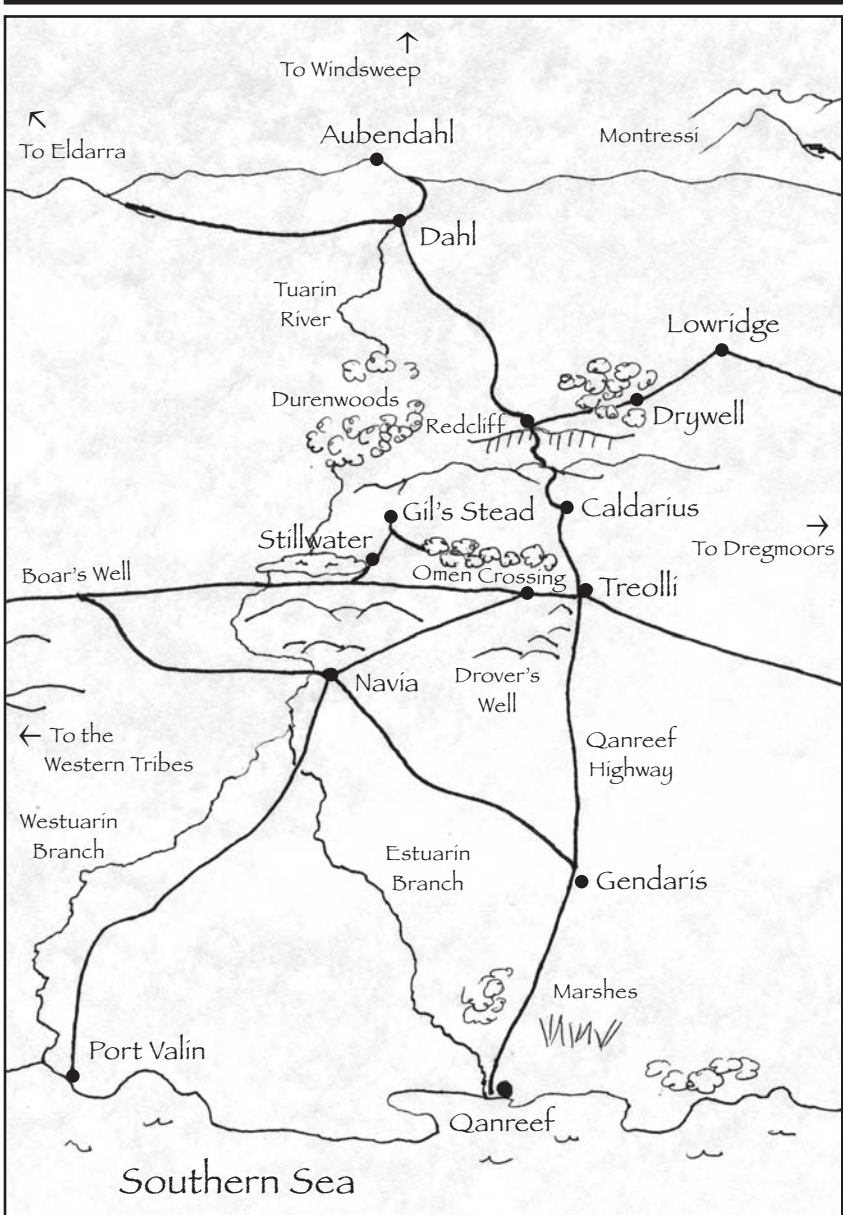
Printed in the United States of America
2011—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*With gratitude to my Vermont College
of Fine Arts friends and mentors,
angels all.*

Camrithia



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Benasin: Advisor to the overlord of Navia.

Caepio: Leader of an acting troupe that travels Camrithia.

Cilla: Serving woman to the nobility at the palace in Qanreef.

Dandreij: The firstborn son of legend, who ate a seed from the fruit of the Wisdom Tree and became immortal.

Dreia: One of the Archae. Guardian of plant life, including the Wisdom Tree.

Dwin: Fifteen-year-old brother of Trevin and aide to Lord Rejius.

Earthbearer: One of the Archae. Guardian of ground and underground; also known as the Lord of the Under-Realm.

Esper: A sylvan earth-angel. Wife of Noll.

Flametender: One of the Archae. Guardian of fire.

Gerda: Dwarf. Angelaeon. Wife of Gil.

Gil: Dwarf. Angelaeon.

Hanamel (Hanni): High priestess of the city of Navia.

Iona: Fourteen-year-old novice priestess from Navia.

Jarrod: Nephili. Priest in the city of Redcliff. Admitted to the ranks of Angelaeon as Exousia, a warrior and keeper of history.

Laetham: King of Camrithia.

Livia: A servant-messenger of the lower order of angels.

Melaia: Sixteen-year-old priestess and chantress of the temple at Navia.

Noll: A sylvan earth-angel. Steward of the Durenwoods.

Nuri: Twelve-year-old novice priestess from Navia.

Paullus: Tavern-keeper at the Full Sail in Qanreef. An angel not committed to Angelaeon or malevolents.

Peron: Six-year-old novice priestess from Navia.

Pymbric (Pym): Armsman to Main Undrian.

Rejius: The king's physician.

Seaspinner: One of the Archae. Guardian of water.

Silas: Overlord of the city of Navia.

Stalia: Daughter of the Firstborn of legend. Became immortal after eating a seed from the fruit of the Wisdom Tree.

Trevin: Twenty-year-old kingsman who serves Lord Rejius.

Undrian: A comain of Camrithia. Commander of men-at-arms.

Windweaver: One of the Archae. Guardian of wind.

Yareth: Son of the overlord of Navia.

Zastra: Queen mother of Camrithia.

THE ANGELAEON

FIRST SPHERE: The three highest ranks are not strictly angels but winged heavenly beings who serve in the presence of the Most High.

CHERUBIM

Guard light and sound (music)

SERAPHIM

Personal servants of the Most High

OPHANIM

Guard celestial travel

SECOND SPHERE:

KURIOTES

Regulate duties of lower angels and govern worlds

ARCHAE

Guardians of the world's elements: wind, fire, water, plant life, and earth

THRONOS

Negotiators and justice-bearers

THIRD SPHERE:

EXOUSIA

Warriors and keepers of history.

ARCHANGELS

Guardians of people groups; influential in politics and commerce

ANGELS

Messengers

WORLD SPHERE:

NEPHILI

The “clouded ones;” half-angel, half-human

SYLVANS

Elf-like earth-angels; inhabit forests and woodlands

WINDWINGS

Winged horses

CHAPTER 1

The prick of the thorn drew blood, but Melaia smiled. The last ramble rose of the season was well worth a pierced thumb. She carefully drew the blossom from the vine that clung to the side of the temple. As she breathed its rich, sweet scent, she sensed someone watching and looked up, expecting to see one of the novice priestesses. She saw only dry leaves skittering across the flagstones of the walled courtyard, along with a black feather, no doubt from a bird scavenging seeds in the woodpile.

Then a haggard young man stepped through the gate, and Melaia drew back. The chill autumn breeze riffled the edge of his dirt-stained cloak, revealing the corner of a journey pack and the hilt of a dagger.

Melaia gave him a tentative nod.

“I’ve come—” His voice was dirt dry. He wiped his fist across his mouth.

“I’ll fetch water.” Melaia tucked the rose into her waist sash and headed for the stone urn by the arched doorway. “Travelers are always welcome at our temple. We’ve pallets if you wish to stay the night.” She would have to check with the high priestess, but Hanni rarely turned away weary travelers.

“My thanks,” the man croaked.

Melaia flipped back her loose honey brown braid and dipped a pottery cup into the cool water. “I’m chantress here, always eager to hear new tales from travelers.”

The young man looked too weary to tell tales. Or too ill. His dark-ringed eyes darted from one afternoon shadow to another, and he cocked his head as if he heard something beyond the walls.

“We’re healers here as well,” she offered.

For a moment his wild eyes focused on her. Then he glanced above her head, and his hand went to his dagger.

But he never drew it.

A hawk, larger than any she'd ever seen, shot like an arrow past Melaia and sank its talons into the stranger's chest. The man's raw screams pierced the air as the hawk's beak knifed at his throat.

Melaia stood stunned and speechless. But as the hawk flapped its great wings and lifted the man a handbreadth off the flagstones, her senses surged back.

She snatched a branch from the woodpile and swung it at the hawk. The raptor screeched and dropped the stranger. "Fight!" she yelled at him. "Fight back!"

But it was the hawk that fought, its wings beating at her stick as its claws snagged the man again. At last Melaia struck a solid blow to the hawk's head, and it skidded sideways. She chased after it, but the raptor took to the air, quickly rose, and soared away over the domed roof of the temple.

Melaia flung aside the stick and fell to her knees by the bloodied man. Then she covered her mouth and swallowed a bitter taste. "Most High, have mercy," she croaked. Seeing wounds so deep and blood flowing freely, she wasn't surprised that the stranger's mistlike spirit had emerged from his body. As a death-prophet, she could see the shadowy echo writhing around his form as he struggled to live.

"Mellie? Is it safe?" Dark-eyed Iona stood in the temple doorway, holding back the other two novices. At fourteen, she was the motherly one, although Melaia was two years older. Curly-haired Peron, still baby plump at six, peered around Iona, clutching her skirts, while twelve-year-old Nuri broke away from them and ran across the yard, her usual dimpled smile gone.

"Is he dead?" Nuri asked.

"Not yet," Melaia told her. "Take Peron and fetch a basket of plumwort. And water."

Nuri stared at the man's wounds. "We saw the hawk."

"Go!" said Melaia. "I need plumwort to stanch the bleeding."

As Nuri dashed away, Melaia wondered why the high priestess hadn't appeared. "Where's Hanni?" she called to Iona.

"Summoned to a birthing. The weaver's wife." Iona nervously twisted the end of her black braid.

"Then come help me carry the man inside."

Melaia hesitated. She was often called to the bedside of the dying to confirm the moment of death, but never had she been required to reach through a spirit to touch someone. Of course, other people did it all the time, she told herself. They just couldn't see the struggling mistlike layer. She took a deep breath, grasped the man's bloodied cloak, and pressed it to the gashes in his chest. His spirit pooled around her wrists, vibrating like a throat quivering with speech.

"Can you hear me?" Melaia asked, keeping pressure on his wound.

The stranger's spirit thrummed frantically, as if he were trying to say something.

"Where's the plumwort?" Melaia yelled.

Nuri ran across the yard, sloshing a jar of water. Peron trotted behind her with the basket of plumwort. Iona knelt at the man's feet, her mouth moving silently in prayer.

Melaia reached for the plumwort, but the man's spirit slid off his body, thinned into a stream, and seeped through a crack in the flagstones. A sudden, grim silence fell over the yard. Melaia shook her head at Nuri and Peron and closed the man's green-flecked eyes.

Peron stuck out her lower lip. "I was too slow."

"No, I was." Nuri's shoulders drooped.

"No one's at fault," said Melaia, but she couldn't help thinking that the man might still be alive if she had only laid into the hawk sooner. "Let's get him inside." She lifted his upper body. For his bulk he was surprisingly light.

Iona lifted his legs. “Starved twig-thin,” she said. “Poor man.”

They carried the stranger to the sanctuary altar, the bier for those who could afford no better. Melaia took a deep breath, wishing Hanni were there. “Iona, find me a winding-sheet,” she said. “Peron, go with Nuri. Fetch more water and scrub the courtyard.”

“But it’s bloody,” said Nuri. Peron wrinkled her nose.

“Would you rather clean the man’s body?” asked Melaia. Nuri and Peron scrambled out the door. Iona followed.

Melaia gently eased the man’s cloak from his chest and winced, wondering where Hanni would begin. She exhaled slowly. “Start with the easiest,” she murmured.

She untangled his pack from one forearm. As she slipped it free, she noticed the end of a small scroll clenched in his fist. “First the pack,” she told herself, glancing around. Her gaze fell on a shelf of incense bowls. She stashed the pack there, then turned back to the altar-bier and froze.

The stranger’s cloak had fallen back and, with it, a long, white, blood-stained wing.

Melaia’s knees almost buckled. “An angel?” she whispered. It couldn’t be. Angels were found only in legends. Chanters’ stories. Bedtime tales.

Iona’s voice echoed down the corridor. “Do we need more water?”

Melaia jerked the cloak back around the man.

Iona strode in with a bundle of white linen. “Do we need more water?”

“We need Hanni,” said Melaia.

“You look as if you’ve seen the man’s ghost.” Iona looked around. “Has he returned?”

“Just go get Hanni.”



Distant drums signaled the closing of Navia’s city gates and the change of watch on the walls. On the altar-bier in the temple, the winged man lay serene and clean, covered in white linen up to his chin. Melaia didn’t often sit with the

dead, but as she lit the oil lamps behind the bier, she decided that tonight she would request a vigil. She hoped the high priestess would join her, for she had a night's worth of questions to ask.

But so far, the high priestess hadn't returned. She had sent Iona back to say that the birthing was a difficult one and she must stay with it, although she was upset at the news of a death in the side yard. Hanni intended to stop by the overlord's villa and bring his advisor, Benasin, back to the temple with her.

As Melaia held the flaming twist of rushweed to the last wick, she eyed the three girls munching their supper on a reed mat across the room. With Hanni gone they had asked to stay with Melaia instead of eating in the hearthroom down the hall. She was glad for their company. She felt as shaky as they did, although she hadn't told them about the stranger's wings. She wanted Hanni's opinion first.

Melaia tossed the spent rushweed into the brazier in the center of the room and stirred the coals into flame. For a moment she watched the smoke curl up and drift like a dying spirit out through the roof hole above. Except dying spirits always drifted down, not up.

"I'm saving my scraps for the chee-dees," Peron said, scooping her crumbs into a tiny hill.

"Fetch your crumb jar from the storeroom, then," said Melaia. "When you've finished cleaning up, I'll tell a story."

Peron stared warily at the dark corridor that lay beyond the bier.

"I'll go with you." Nuri slipped one of the lamps from its niche. With an uneasy smile she guided Peron to the corridor, giving wide berth to the bier.

Iona stoppered the olive oil. "Peron is telling tales again. This time it's about two falcons scaring away her songbird friends."

"She must have been inspired by the hawk in the yard today." Melaia stacked the empty wooden bowls and glanced at the stranger who should have eaten a meal with them tonight.

"Peron said the vultures were darker than closed eyes," said Iona.

"I can picture that." Melaia lifted her harp from its peg.

“And they had people hands.” Iona rolled her eyes.

“That I can’t picture,” said Melaia. “Too ghoul-ish.”

Iona laughed. “With such an imagination Peron will surely become a chantress.”

A shriek came from the corridor. Peron darted into the room, hugging her crumb jar, with Nuri on her heels. Both girls were open-mouthed and wide-eyed.

Behind them limped a sharp-nosed, beardless man wearing a cloak fashioned completely of feathers—brown, black, and an iridescent blue that glinted in the lamplight. The skin around one of his round gold eyes was blackened, and a scratch jagged across his brow.

Melaia went cold, head to toe. How had the man entered? Had she left the side door unbolted?

Nuri and Peron ran to Iona, and all three huddled by the wall. Melaia stifled her impulse to join them. Hanni had left her in charge, so in charge she would be. She had fought off a murdering hawk. She had prepared a bloody winged man for burial. She would stand up to this intruder.

She strode to the brazier, her hands clammy as she clung to her harp. “This is the temple of the Most High,” she said, hoping he wouldn’t hear the quaver in her voice.

“So it is,” he hissed, limping to the bier. “I believe I noticed that.”

“What’s your business here?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Surely you’re not the high priestess.”

“She’s the chantress,” blurted Peron.

“Ah. Singer of songs, soother of sorrows,” he crooned.

“If you’re here for our treasury box, take it and be on your way,” said Melaia.

“I have unfinished business with the high priestess,” he said.

“You can find her at the overlord’s villa,” said Melaia.

“No doubt.” With a gloved hand he slid back the sheet that covered the

corpse. He smiled at the gashes, then studied Melaia. "Chantress, play your harp for me."

Melaia gaped at him. "You have no right—"

"Or let me play it," he said. "The little girl can bring it. The one who feeds the birds."

Peron's eyes grew round as the supper bowls, and she shrank behind Iona's skirts.

Melaia hugged the harp tighter to her chest and glared at the man defiantly, even as she fought back a fear that curdled in the pit of her stomach. How long had this swaggerer been spying on them?

His unblinking gold eyes stared back at her. "I do not take disobedience lightly." His voice was ice. "Send the girl with the harp or play it yourself."

Melaia swallowed dryly. She felt her courage fall as limp as the poor stranger in the yard. Keeping her eyes on the intruder, she sank to a bench by the brazier and positioned the harp in her lap.

"Let us hear the tale of the Wisdom Tree," he said. "You know it, don't you, Chantress?"

Melaia scowled at him and motioned for the girls to join her. As she fingered the melody, they silently gathered around, and she breathed easier. Together they were safer, with the brazier as a barrier between them and the bully. She turned her attention back to the harp, and over the music she spoke the tale.

In a time long ago, there lived a tribal chieftain whose firstborn son was a wealthy trader, his second-born a lone hunter. Each year at harvest festival, his sons vied to present him with the best gift. The Firstborn always gave perfumes, musicians, slave dancers, the treasures of his trade. The Second-born presented partridges, deerskins, lion-claw necklaces, the spoils of the hunt. But the Second-born thought his gifts paltry compared to those of the Firstborn. So he set out to seek the greatest gift of all.

Far and wide he journeyed, to no avail. At last, weary and discouraged, he lay to rest in the shade of a tree as tall and wide as the tower of a citadel. The Wisdom Tree it was, bearing fruit that granted the eater knowledge and cleverness.

Peron popped her thumb out of her mouth and chanted, “Within this tree stood the stairway to heaven made wholly of light.”

“Exactly,” said Melaia, glad that for the moment the tale was distracting Peron from the intruder, whose gold eyes held a hungry glitter. Melaia continued:

An angel named Dreia, guardian of the Tree, saw the Second son lying there and asked the cause of his despair. When he told his tale, she pitied him and gave him the juice of one fruit. “This will grant you knowledge and cleverness to find the right gift for your father,” she said. As he sipped the juice, the man’s eyes brightened. “I know the perfect gift,” he said. “A fruit from this Tree.”

Dreia hadn’t intended to give the man a whole fruit. Its seeds were precious, carried by angels into the heavens to plant wisdom trees in worlds among the stars. Yet the man was handsome, his entreaties eloquent.

At last Dreia said, “You may take one fruit if you vow to bring me the first creature that greets you when you arrive home. This I shall send over the stairway as payment. Moreover, you shall return the three seeds of this fruit, for they are strictly forbidden to mortals. Should you fail to repay your debt, the Tree itself shall exact payment in breath and blood.”

The Second-born agreed to the bargain, for the one who always greeted his homecoming was his old hunting dog. Taking his dog and the seeds back to Dreia would be good reason to see the beautiful angel again. So he carried the fruit home.

While he was still afar off, he saw, bounding across the field to greet him, his young niece. "Uncle!" she cried. "Terrible news. Your old hunting dog has died."

The Second-born fell to his knees and wept, not for his dog, but for his niece, the only daughter of the Firstborn, now to be payment for his debt.

Melaia paused as the intruder slipped off his gloves. His fingernails were long, curved, and sharp. Talons. Her pulse pounded at her throat. His blackened eye, his scratched brow, his feathered cloak, his limp.

She had met him before. As a hawk.

"Is there no ending to the tale?" He smirked at her recognition of him and stroked the corpse. "I favor endings."

Melaia felt foggy, as if she were in a dream. She tried to gather her thoughts.

"The Second-born knew only one way to escape his debt," Iona prompted.

"Yes." Melaia cleared her throat and forced out the words.

The Second-born knew he had to destroy the Wisdom Tree.

Dreia saw an army approaching, the Second son in the lead, betrayal in his heart. She gathered what angels she could. Some plucked the remaining fruit and hastened over the stairway to celestial worlds. Others stayed behind to defend the Tree. But these were not warring angels. The best they could do was save some of the wood as the Tree fell and was plundered by men who wanted pieces for themselves.

"That was the end of the stairway," Nuri said.

"And the end of angels in our world," added Iona.

"But the brothers planted the seeds of the Wisdom Tree," offered Peron, "didn't they?"

"They did." Melaia set the harp aside. "The brothers learned that cultivating wisdom takes patience."

The girls chimed in, "Wisdom, over time, is earned."

The hawkman hissed. "A pitiful ending and woefully false." He pointed a taloned finger at Melaia. "Remember this, Chantress. The Second-born abducted his niece and headed for Dreia. But fortune was with the Firstborn, for I discovered the treachery in time to rescue my daughter. To ensure that the Tree never collected on the debt, I destroyed it. My daughter and I ate the seeds, round and shiny, red as blood. We became immortal!"

"You're trying to haunt us with our own tale." Melaia took up a poker and stabbed the coals in the brazier, determined not to show her fear. "There were three seeds."

"So there were," said the hawkman. "The third I crammed down my brother's throat. Now he owes his debt for all eternity. And it is my pleasure to make sure he never repays." He grinned at the dead man. "Son of Dreia, this night you are destroyed."

He snatched up the corpse, and its wings unfolded. The girls shrieked and ran to Melaia.

The hawkman dropped the body back to the bier as if it had burned him. Then he cursed and shoved it to the floor. He scanned the room. "The man had a pack. Where is it?"

"Maybe he lost it in the side yard." Melaia felt her face grow warm at the half lie.

But the man didn't press his search. Instead, he stiffened and stared at the front door, his head cocked, listening. Melaia heard only wind, but the hawkman slowly retreated, tense as a cat backing away from danger. He glanced from the door to the window to the roof hole, where smoke drifted into the night. Then he hurtled toward the brazier, and his body contorted.

All of Melaia's instincts screamed at her to run, but she stayed her feet, clenched her jaw, and gripped the poker with both hands. As the hawk leaped into the flames, she swung with all her might.

She struck only air as he rose in the smoke and vanished.

CHAPTER 2

Melaia was still gaping at the roof hole, watching smoke swirl away, when Benasin, the overlord's advisor, barged into the sanctuary like a dog on the hunt, his windblown dark hair giving him a wild look.

The high priestess swept in after him and slipped off her gold-trimmed blue cloak. She paused to catch her breath, her almond-eyed gaze trailing him around the room as he inspected every nook. "You run like a young man, Benasin," she said. "What did you sense?" When he gave no answer, she turned to Melaia. "What's happening?"

The other girls all spoke at once, pointing at the roof hole. "Strange man—" "Gold eyes—" "Up there—" The words bobbed like apples in water.

"And the other man, he has wings," said Peron, pointing at the stranger on the bier.

"The cloaked man called him Dreia's son," explained Melaia. "He started to take the body, then changed his mind."

"No wonder in that." Benasin squatted beside the corpse. "Your visitor saw the wings and knew his mistake. Dreia's son doesn't have wings."

"Who is the winged man?" asked Melaia.

"I intend to find out," said Benasin. "He's one of the angels, that's certain."

"Angels are real, then." Nuri frowned at Melaia. "You said your stories were just legend."

"I thought they were." Melaia knelt beside Benasin. "You spoke of Dreia as if she's real."

"She is," said Benasin. "Legend is often based on truth."

“But according to legend, Dreia is an angel,” Melaia pointed out. “So her son would be too. Wouldn’t he have wings?”

“Mellie, for once try to hold back your questions,” said Hanni.

“It’s all right, Hanamel,” said Benasin. “The girls deserve answers for what they’ve seen.”

“You have answers?” asked Hanni.

“Some.” Benasin gently lifted the corpse and laid it back on the bier. “To start, few angels have wings. This one happens to be an Erielyon, one of the lower ranks of angels. A simple messenger. Erielyon are the only winged angels.”

Iona stepped gingerly toward the bier. “I’ve never seen an angel before.”

“How would you know if they don’t have wings?” asked Nuri.

“I wish I had wings.” Peron snuggled up to Melaia and put her thumb in her mouth.

“That would make you the lowest rank,” said Nuri. “I’d rather be higher.”

“How many ranks are there?” Melaia stroked Peron’s silky hair.

Benasin eyed Hanni. “You’ve not schooled your charges in the histories?”

“It’s all I can do to train them in herbs and rites. We’ve little time for histories. As for angels, they should stay in tales.” Hanni sank to the bench at the brazier and stared weary eyed at the stranger.

“But the tale of the Wisdom Tree,” said Melaia. “Is it in the histories? Is it true?”

“The part about no more angels in the world is obviously wrong,” said Iona.

The girls began guessing which parts of the tale were true, which false. Hanni flapped her hands at them as if shooing chicks. “Off with you now. To your prayers and pallets.”

As Melaia herded the girls out, Hanni caught her arm. “You’ll be wanted here,” she said. “Iona will take charge.”

Melaia followed Hanni to the bier, where Benasin was examining the angel’s wounds. Melaia cringed at the sight of the gashes. Even though she had cleansed them, it took all her willpower to keep from turning away.

“Hanamel told me about the hawk.” Benasin glanced at Melaia. “You saw the attack?”

“Hanni was at a birthing. The girls came running when they heard the screams. I don’t know how much they saw, but…” She bit her lip. A hawkman sounded imaginary. Yet before tonight angels had existed only in legend. “The man who was here tonight is the hawk that killed the angel.”

Benasin’s face hardened. “You’re sure?” He searched her eyes.

“His face was scratched, and he limped,” said Melaia. “It was my doing. I chased away the hawk with a stick.”

A smile flickered at the corners of Benasin’s mouth. “Shameful, being beaten away by a priestess.” He drew the sheet over the Erielyon’s chest.

“But a hawk who becomes a man?” Hanni shook her head. “It can’t be.”

“You’re right,” said Benasin. “He’s more likely a man who becomes a hawk.”

“Wonderful.” Hanni held up her hands in exasperation. “Why now, Benasin? Why here?”

“Should I know the why of it?” he asked.

Hanni shook a finger at him. “Don’t trifle with me. You’re one of them. You’re—” She glanced at Melaia.

Benasin raised his eyebrows.

Hanni’s gaze locked onto Benasin’s. “You’re an angel, and you know more than you’re saying.”

Melaia stared at Benasin. “Do you have wings?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “I had none the last time I looked.”

“Benasin is not an Erielyon,” said Hanni.

“Angels are of different races,” said Benasin. “For the most part they move about undetected.”

“And they live extremely long lives,” said Hanni.

“But they can be killed.” Melaia eyed the Erielyon.

“True,” said Benasin. “Angels can be killed in physical form, which is how most appear in the world these days. But if they can avoid getting themselves

killed, then, as far as I know, their time here is unlimited. I tend to think of myself as immortal." Benasin stroked his close-trimmed beard. "This winged one was no doubt a messenger. Did he say anything before he died?"

"He tried." Melaia shivered at the memory of his vibrating spirit. "He carried a pack." She retrieved it from the shelf and handed it to Benasin.

He drew out a thin, palm-sized wooden box.

"A money box," said Hanni.

"A codex, rather." Benasin lifted the lid and thumbed through leaves of papyrus. "A book." He closed the wooden cover and held it out for Hanni to see.

Melaia leaned in to look. A *V* with a line running straight up the center was carved into the ruddy cover.

"The sign of the Tree," said Hanni. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"I know this book," said Benasin. "It's Dreia's. I expected her to send her son here, not the book. It seems, instead, that we have the book and not the son."

"You expected Dreia?" Hanni's mouth dropped open.

"You know Dreia?" Melaia asked.

Benasin made no answer as he leafed through the book.

"He knows her quite well," Hanni said as if it were an accusation.

"You assume I know more than I'm telling," said Benasin. "I assure you, I know very little."

"I'm aware that angels can't know things that depend on human choice." Hanni narrowed her eyes at him. "But don't you have insight into the spiritual realm?"

"Are you worried Dreia will come here for her book?" asked Benasin.

"An angel dies in our courtyard, an intruder frightens my girls, says he has unfinished business with me, and disturbs a corpse." Hanni paced to the brazier, then whirled around. "Who under the Most High has unfinished business with me?"

"Who indeed?" muttered Benasin.

Melaia glanced back and forth between Benasin and Hanni. She had never seen the high priestess so agitated. Both Hanni and Benasin seemed to have forgotten she was present.

“It’s my duty to protect this temple and my priestesses,” said Hanni. “I do not wish to be mixed up in the disputes of angels. You of all people—of all—”

“Beings?” Benasin seemed amused.

Hanni huffed. “You of all the creatures that roam this wild world should understand.”

Melaia bit her lip. Hanni’s sharp, direct observations intimidated most people, but Benasin was unruffled. He obviously knew he had to brave some thorns to reach Hanni’s soft side.

“Dreia is an enigma to me,” said Benasin. “She’s always coming up with these sayings.” He thumped the book.

“I’m not talking about sayings, and you know it,” said Hanni. “I thought I was done with angels.”

“Except for me?” he asked.

Hanni rubbed her forehead and sighed. “Except for you. Yes. But I do not want this, Benasin.” She pointed to the Erielyon. “Do something. Take the corpse.”

Melaia cleared her throat. “There’s one thing more.” They both looked at her as if she had just arrived. “When I cleansed the body, I saw a scroll in his fist. I left it there.”

Benasin set the book aside and uncovered the corpse.

“It will be tight bound by now.” Hanni joined Benasin, who worked with the angel’s fist.

As Melaia looked on, Benasin inched a crumpled scroll from the angel’s grip. He unrolled it and read, “Now is payment due in full.”

“Well enough, then,” said Hanni. “It’s no secret that you wager, Benasin. I would say your debts have caught up with you.”

“I’ve paid all. All but one.” Benasin looked askance at Melaia. “You have no debts, have you?”

“Me?” Melaia blinked at him. “I’ve never wagered or borrowed—”

“I thought not. Yet the messenger was approaching you with the scroll.”

“I was the only one in the yard.” Melaia tried to rub the chill from her arms. “Besides, he didn’t give it to me.”

Benasin tucked the scroll into his waist pouch. “Did I not say Dreia was an enigma?” He took up the book again. “I’d like to sit here awhile to see if this book yields any answers. With your permission, Hanamel.”

“Of course,” said Hanni. “And you’ll take the Erielyon’s body? Tomorrow?”

Benasin eased himself onto the bench by the brazier. “I’ll think on it.”

Hanni bolted the front door. “You may retire now, Mellie.”

“I thought I would keep vigil.” Melaia retrieved her lap harp from the bench. “I’d not be able to sleep anyway. I’ve seen two angels today.”

“Three.” Hanni headed to the corridor. “Only an angel can kill an angel.”

As Hanni’s footfalls faded, Melaia frowned at Benasin. He looked up. “The man who killed the Erielyon...” she said. “He claimed to be the firstborn son of legend. So he wouldn’t be an angel, would he?”

“You listened well.”

“But Hanni said—”

“Hanamel hears what she wants to hear. She’d like to stuff the dangerous, unkempt world into a pouch and pull the drawstring closed. To keep life tidy. Safe. In her control. Today the drawstring was cut and the bag opened.”

Melaia hugged her harp. She had never thought of Hanni in that way.

“Hanamel was wrong on at least two counts,” said Benasin. “For one, as you surmised, an angel can also be killed by an immortal.”

“The Firstborn is truly immortal, then?” asked Melaia.

“As well as his daughter and his brother, the Second-born.”

“And Dreia was truly the guardian of the Tree?”

“She was.” Benasin closed the book and patted the bench beside him.

Melaia sat with her harp in her lap, basking in Benasin’s presence. She had often thought that if she could choose a father, she would choose him. He was

generous with his money and his encouragement, firm as well as kind, not easily ruffled, and so wise that even Hanni went to him for advice. Besides that, he always smelled of cedar, warm and woody.

“You asked about angels’ ranks,” he said. “The highest rank are celestial beings but not truly angels. Dreia is of the Archae, who are in the second rank. The Archae guard the elements of the world: wind, fire, water, earth, plant life.”

“But I thought Dreia guarded the Wisdom Tree.”

“She did. She called it her temple. But her guardianship extended to all plants of the world.” He stared into the embers in the brazier. “Tragic was the day the Second-born asked for the fruit of the Tree; tragic the day Dreia gave it to him.”

Melaia stirred the coals. “Now the brothers are immortal.”

“As is their feud.”

“Perhaps they will kill each other.”

Benasin snorted. “Don’t think they haven’t tried. Dreia’s only hope is to restore the Tree and its stairway.”

“And if she fails?”

“Then your world, and the angels trapped in it, will continue to descend into the ever-deepening savagery of the immortals’ feud.”

Melaia squatted at his feet with a new notion. “Would you teach me about the spirit world?”

He chuckled. “And what would Hanamel say to that?”

Melaia shrugged. “I’m to be high priestess after her. I should know about the histories. Didn’t you say so yourself? I want to know what Hanni can’t tell me.”

“Or won’t.” Benasin patted her head. “First let me take care of the Erielyon’s body for Hanamel. Then we’ll see.”

“You said Hanni was wrong on two counts. What was the second?”

Benasin glanced at the corridor. “That, for the moment, is better left unsaid.”