## **PROLOGUE:**

**The Black Dome**

IT WAS A LONG day, and a long march to reach to Black Dome. Pirran arrived with his men just past sunset. The light from the setting sun gave the Dome an awesome halo, magnifying the terror that was already burning in his heart.

Pirran shouted the order to dismount, and his men were fast to comply. They were a rough looking lot, but Pirran knew that none of them was at ease. Not in a place like this.

He still didn’t know if he had to camp here for the night. He didn’t know if the other Blue Rings have made it yet or not. He didn’t plan to be the first arrival, but there is only so much biding your sweet time before it started to look suspicious.

Khev came forward, his eyes watching the hill-sized Dome from the corner of his eye, as if it would suddenly leap and crush them all… would it?

“What should we do now, master?” He mouthed, his voice hesitant.

Pirran opened his mouth to reply, but he really didn’t know what to say. He was ordered to be here as soon as he could abandoning all else he was doing. And it was just when he came to see that he knew where *here* was. The Black Dome was only getting blacker with the dying light of the day, which did nothing to help his blackening mood.

He realised that his mouth was hanging stupidly, so he cleared his throat and said “scout around, not too far. I only want to know if anyone else have made it. Set the men to work on meals. And be alert all of you.”

Khev nodded, and moved back to the men to relay the orders, and Pirran watched his men set to work. Or at least begin to…

A horse appeared from east, galloping toward Pirran. A distinct blue cloak flying from the rider’s back like a flag in the wind. He closed on him at a dead run. And soon he recognised the blue-clad rider.

“Attend!” He shouted to his men as he dismounted, still watching the newcomer, and the noise of men set to work quickly faded into nothing.

The blue-clad rider dismounted, and approached Pirran with a wide smile. He extended his hand and as Pirran extended his, he caught hold of his forearm and pulled him into a friendly hug.

“I worried you’d lose your way getting’ here, ol’ friend.” Tandon said merrily with his rough voice, and Pirran smiled back. “nah, you’re in time. Almost everyone’s here.” Tandon finished.

Pirran allowed Tandon to pull him to walk by his side, still dealing with his own anxiety. How could someone laugh and joke near the Devil’s stronghold? That was beyond him.

“who’s still not here?” He managed to say.

“well, let’s see,” Tandon countered, “the Lord Nazar is here of course, Hicks is wherever the Lord is. I arrived shortly after, just yesterday actually. And since you’re here that leaves only Louiy.” He finished with a dismissing wave of his hand.

“Sure to Twelve Gods! *he* would arrive last, and probably make a dramatic entrance» Pirran noted half-amused. “I will give command to my men to move, where should I meet?”.

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll ride with you.”

The remounting was done in a minuet. As the men didn’t have the chance to scatter. They rode circling around the Dome. Pirran’s ride was spent catching up with Tandon, and exchanging whatever story judged interesting enough to waste chatting time, and most were. The forest cleared about a mile or so around the Dome, earth was bear underneath the hooves of the horses, and no rock larger than can be held in one hand lay anywhere near. So no one -stupid enough to be here in the first place- could hide his own shadow behind himself.

They rode for a few minuets before he glimpsed the campfires of less than two hundred men.

Tandon trailed off both his story and his laughter, and reined his gelding to a stop. “I assume you’d want to meet the Lord Nazar first thing. It’s best to report straight off.” He suggested.

Pirran nodded, he motioned Khev to the camp and booted Vantec to a fast stride toward the pavilion near the edge of the Dome. As he closed in , the Dome started to look more like an impossibly tall wall. It covered most of the sky. It covered this entire part of the world.

At the entrance to the pavilion that shrunk to nothing in comparison, stood Hicks. The huge behemoth of a man looked as he always did, empty. His face and probably soul if he had one had no warmth. No life. He glanced intensely at Pirran, and Pirran held his eyes while dismounting Vantec, and while approaching the pavilion. Hicks stared into his eyes for a long second, but Pirran didn’t give in. Then Hicks moved aside, gesturing him to go in.

Inside the massive tent, Nazar sat cross-legged on the canvas floor. Pirran let the tent flap close behind him. The pavilion was lit by a half-dozen simple mirrored stand lamps. the leader’s eyes were closed, his hands settled in his lap, and his head cocked downward letting his long dark hair fall on his shoulders.

Pirran cleared his throat audibly to alert Nazar, and he looked up, he for once looked taken aback.

“Good evening, Number Four.” Nazar said, smiling warmly. “You’re just in time. We are supposed to go in tonight. You certainly wouldn’t want to anger my father by not attending.”

*My father*. What would you take from that really? It’s not like Pirran had any fancy that Nazar had any sanity left in him, But certainly even the mad would think carefully before calling Azurim, the Devil, father.

“Evening, my Lord Number One. I would surely die before I disobey your summons,” Pirran didn’t question that fact. Nazar however dismissed the notion with a lazy wave of his hand. “But I just learned that Number Five didn’t come yet. Surely we would wait for Louiy my Lord.” He was careful to make the last sound like a question.

“You obviously don’t know Louiy, Number Four.” Nazar mused. “He Leaped here with his men two nights ago. He is waiting for everyone to be here and see his arrival. Quite the showman he is.”

Pirran nodded. Louiy *Leaped* his entire force of five dozen men. Impressive, or arrogant? dangerous at best, catastrophic at worst. But still advantageous.

“Do you have any orders for me, my Lord?” Pirran asked.

“No. Rest with your men, and be prepared for the night. It’s rather important.” Nazar said absentmindedly. “Also, don’t drink.” He added “You will want to have your senses on you tonight. That goes for the men as well.”

Pirran bowed his head at Nazar’s dismissal, and retreated toward the tent flap.

Outside he took a last look at the fearsome Black Dome, duelled Hicks stare for cold stare, and started toward camp.

He soon found Tandon standing alone, his blank eyes watching the dark wall of the Dome. He neared his friend and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Quite the view,” he pronounced. “Jals should envy us really.”

“Nah,” Tandon replied, shaking himself awake. “They’ve got the better one. I’ve actually seen it.”

“More the reason to be envied.” Pirran insisted. “You might be one of the few who’ve seen both.” Tandon yawned, then smiled at his friend. Pirran continued, “the only one I know of is Jikal, may he be blessed…”

Pirran’s ass was pinched, and he jumped. He looked behind him to see Eilese, one of Tandon’s. certainly the best looking one of Tandon’s. She stood there smiling wickedly.

“Hey there, sweet thing.” she called at him, causing Tandon to chuckle softly.

“Hey,” he replied. “I didn’t here you come.” He explained.

“Oh you never have, little Pirran.” she answered playfully.

Pirran felt his face heating. “It’s like that with you, isn’t it?” He said, taking her into a hug.

“Well, I don’t mind you prove me wrong.” She elbowed him in the ribs.

It was Tandon who replied, “not tonight Eilese. We all have a hotter rendezvous, with Devil himself.”

“Too bad.” She said. “Master…” she hesitated, her smile fading into a disturbed frown.

“Spit it out.” Tandon ordered.

“Is it true?” she asked shuffling uneasily.

“Is *what* true?” Tandon said sighing, Pirran moved his eyes back and forth between the two of them during the exchange.

“That *he’*s his father. That *he*’s Azurim. The Devil. Godslayer.” She murmured.

“Get back to your post, Eilese.” Tandon ordered resignedly. “Don’t busy your beautiful head thinking about *him*, it’s not your place.” He finished.

Eilese nodded acceptance, her face unchanged, and she left the two of them as briskly as she came. Pirran picked her unanswered question and mouthed it out again, conversationally.

“I don’t know, ol’ friend,” Tandon responded. “And frankly, I don’t give a shit. We’re here because we were ordered to be here, and we’ll leave *when* we’re ordered. No point speculating before we meet him now, is there?”

“No; no point.”

The remnant of the daylight died off soon after, Pirran and Tandon stood there chatting about small things; dreams unaccomplished, hopes lost, and different ones arising, it was healthy to talk about things you don’t talk about, every now and again; most so with someone you trust.

As theorised by Nazar, Louiy arrived with the night. He and his lot at a dead gallop, carrying torches above their heads, the fire from each an arch four feet in the air, with tongues of crimson or blue. It was a grand show worth an audience in Hanceburg with the High King applauding as they bowed.

Louiy threw himself from his saddle as he reached Lord Number One’s pavilion, hitting the ground hard with his booted feet, almost ruining the effect of his entrance by toppling. Pirran wished he fell and broke something.

Tandon touched Pirran’s arm and said, “come on, let’s be close. I think it’s time he told us to move in.”

They walked to the pavilion, and he heard Nazar addressing Louiy.

“…No reason at all. Regardless, we’ll have enough time for everything later. My father has been patient enough. Too patient actually.”

“as you say, Nazar.” Louiy said, sounding amused, as always. “let’s just be done with this. I have business elsewhere.”

Nazar sighed. “let me give you a little piece of advice, Number Five.” He said tiredly. “The lines I allow to cross, my father will burn you to oblivion if you come near.”

“So I shouldn’t call the Devil by name. Easy enough for me to catch on my own, *my Lord*.”

“It would be best if you keep your mouth shut, answer him if he asks you a question, and keep your answers short and sufficient. Understood?”

“Don’t mind…” Louiy started, but was interrupted by Hicks.

“Look at me boy,” the grim man snapped, his voice hoarse but loud enough to get the attention of a mountain. “I swear to whatever’s worth swearing to, if you give me the slightest reason I will enjoy killing you. You’ll find Azurim’s treat a lovely picnic when I’m half done.”

“Enough,” Nazar said as calm as a breeze. “be kind to each other. What will my father think of you all? We go in now,” he announced, and gestured to the four of them to follow him across toward the Dome.

“I didn’t know you knew the word ‘lovely.’” Louiy mused, gaining himself another deadly stare from Hicks. The two Louiy’s men who still accompanied him -Geg and was it Vhenecro?- rested hands on sword hilts in a fast reflex.

“Careful now, lad.” Tandon addressed Louiy. Pirran disapproved of interfering, but kept silent.

“Number Three. If it isn’t a fine night to see you. And Number four. aren’t I thankful to this gathering for bringing us all together for once!”

Pirran followed Nazar instead of having to answer. He paced on the futile dirt causing unmentionable dust, and eventually picked up with the leader as they reached the immense stone artefact. It had no door that he saw from this angle, in fact, as he suspected; it was all one entity, it wasn’t built from stone, it was *a* stone. Not plastered, the stone was bare, but it simply was all one piece.

The others followed shortly. And Nazar closed in and walked through the stone wall and vanished inside. It was unlike anything Pirran had seen. Not like Arts or even Conjury.

Pirran was the first to follow in, the stone of the Dome didn’t resist as he pushed through, he squinted and waited for his eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness. He recognised Nazar’s posture crossing the broad hall.

Hicks came in next followed by Louiy who was still talking gently to Tandon who entered last.

Pirran studied the space around him. It was a hall. Luxurious enough to be in the Grand Palace. It had eight massive tables with two dozen fancy chairs of dark wood and stuffed red velvet each. It had tall gold mirrored stand-lamps lining the length of the two long walls in two rows. And it had tapestries worked with goldthread, forming writing in a language that must be a thousand years old, scenes from cities Pirran doubted still existed, or bizarre beasts that he doubted still walked the land -or flew the air.

He noticed four crystal chandeliers filling the ceiling of the hall, each one which was worth a price would feed a town for weeks. The rug that crossed the entire length of the hall was the finest wool he’d ever seen. Burgundy with patterns of deep blue and golden on both sides. That alone was worth…

“follow me,” said Nazar, crossed the hollow hall empty from any living soul except for them. They followed him of course.

Nazar led the Blue Rings through hallways, and up stairs, and through walkways, the simplest of them had a rug and a set of lamps facing one another. Eventually he pushed through a double-door ten feet tall, leading into a small meeting room. Small compared to others he’d seen, the room was actually quite large, and compared to the grand hall he’d seen, the room looked like an inn’s taproom.

It had a big rectangular table near the middle of it, with five wooden chairs around it. It had a simple rug of no particular colour. The room was lit by torchlight, leaving a hint of the acrid smell of smoke in the air.

Nazar took a seat on one side of the table, beside him sat Hicks, and across from him sat Louiy. Pirran chose the farthest chair from him, judging that that would be the direction from which would come Azurim, may he… something. Tandon sat beside him, across from Hicks.

Pirran looked down at his hands resting on the smooth board, and he saw a silver cup of wine that wasn’t there a moment earlier. Again, it had nothing to do with Arts, and probably not Conjury. It was something far more disturbing.

He met eyes with Nazar, who smiled at him. He looked at Tandon looking for something to comfort him, he didn’t find any. Dozen damns! Even Hicks didn’t look at rest.

A shuffling sounded from behind him, but before he turned to see, he saw Hicks turn his head behind *him*, and so did Louiy check his left side. Pirran turned to find nothing. And when turned back…

There was a sixth chair at the long end of the table then. And on it sat a man. *Much for grand entrances, but what did you expect.*

Louiy started. He muffled a curse at seeing the man appearing just next to him. It obviously was not Leaping. You didn’t Leap to a sitting position, in a chair half tucked under a table, in a closed room.

The man was fair of skin, dark of hair and eyes, with a big beak of a nose, and a thin line for a mouth. Pirran saw an unnerving resemblance between him and Nazar -discounting Nazar’s dark-blue eyes. He wasn’t broad of shoulders, and hard as it was judging while he sat; Pirran thought the man were of average height at best. Not an impressive specimen, but he *was* Azurim.

Nazar stood in a heartbeat, and so did everyone else, bowing deeply. “Father,” he proclaimed calmly, and sat down. The rest of them didn’t, for obvious reasons, not until Azurim lifted a palm, gesturing them to.

“Nazar,” Azurim said, his voice musical, like a too-loose string of a guitar. His eyes were studying the men sitting around his table, nonchalantly. He wasn’t impressed. “You took your time now, didn’t you?”

“Forgive me father,” Nazar replied in an almost mechanical way. “Though we had difficulties, but we’re here now.”

Azurim just kept peering. He didn’t seem to hear Nazar. “Introduce your men, will you.” He muttered lazily, and sipped wine from a golden cup set with red and green stones.

Nazar went silent for a short moment, then he curved his mouth grimacing. “Allow me to introduce the Blue Rings, father.” He said, and started pointing. “Number Two, Hicks. Number Five, Louiy. Number Three, Tandon. And Number Four, Pirran.” He counted. “Blue Rings. This is my father. Lord Azurim, who needn’t be introduced.”

Pirran performed his best sitting bow.

“You have served Nazar for a time now,” Azurim picked up. “but I want you to forget all that, for now you serve me.

“The true reason of the Blue Rings’ existence begins now, and now you dedicate yourselves for that purpose.”

The Blue Rings exchanged glances, not sure what to make of that. Pirran felt his stomach churning, service to the Devil. What sort of service would he require of them? Pirran didn’t want to be the one to ask though.

“Father,” Nazar started, after the silence extended beyond comfort. “If you would elaborate. I haven’t explained a thing to them. You haven’t told *me* everything yet.”

“Don’t be hasty, Nazar.” The Devil spoke with his hypnotising voice. “No good comes from haste.” He drew a deep breath, then continued. “Do they know about my first Vision?” Nazar shook his head. “Good,” he exhaled. “They don’t need to. The reason I summoned you and your men is because I had another. I have seen a certain Vision. It heralds the beginning of the end. It heralds the return of my glory, and it heralds a great turn of events, here and on the other side of the world. And most importantly.

“It tells me that the one who shall serve me walks the land, he will come to great power in a matter of few years. And when he does. I want you to be there, to control him and to bring him to me.”

Pirran felt his throat very dry, like a dead branch in late summer, and looked at the cup in front of him longingly. ‘*The return of my glory’* he’d said. There was one way that could come to be, and Pirran didn’t like the thought of it.

“Orders, Father?” Nazar asked gently. Even Nazar looked slightly shocked.

Azurim must have noticed, he disregarded Nazar’s question, and instead said, “I want you to think of the rewards I may grant you when this is all over. When you’ve all served. And I want you all to Know that what you’re do, you do for the best of yourselves and everyone.”

“Orders?” Nazar repeated.

“Take off your rings,” Azurim demanded lightly. “All of you”.

Everyone complied. Pirran took of the ring he was given by Nazar when he was made Commander of the Fourth Division. The ring was of no metal Pirran could recognise, it was blue, of course, the edges dull gold, and engraved with either ugly ornamental designs, or something in a dead alphabet. He slid it across to the middle of the table, and Tandon passed it along with his own.

Soon enough Azurim held four rings in his hand. He looked askance at Nazar. “Aren’t you going to give me yours?” He inquired heatedly.

“I would like to keep my things for myself,” Nazar replied, with no hint of being intimidated in his voice. Pirran noted that in his mind.

Azurim closed grip on the ring in his fist. His eyes could bore holes in Nazar’s skull just then. Then he brought his closed hand under his mouth and muttered something too quiet too hear, and threw the rings back to the table.

Nazar collected and redistributed them. Pirran carried his between his thumb and forefinger, and studied it thoroughly. Nothing seemed to have changed, but Pirran knew better than to trust that.

“wear it.” Azurim commanded. Pirran realised that he was the one addressed, as all others already wore theirs. “It will not bite.”

Pirran slid the ring back on his middle finger.

“Never take these off. If you do, you will die.” Azurim declared.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Hicks demanded. Pirran held his breath, still working out Azurim’s announcement.

Azurim raised an eyebrow at him. “I am not used to being questioned, mortal.” He said haughtily, causing Hicks to burst into laughter.

“Enough!” Nazar shouted. “You will behave yourself, Hicks.”

Azurim upraised a palm toward Nazar, his eyes locked on Hicks. Soon he smiled, “it’s alright.” He said.

Louiy emptied his stomach on the side of the table. Pirran felt like he also would, Tandon was staring into nothing, and trying tot to look like he was. Only Nazar and Hicks kept their composure, other than a disgusted look at Louiy from the first.

“Are you done, kid?” Azurim asked Louiy. And he nodded softly, flushing with embarrassment, or fear. “Well, let’s return to our subject, shall we.” Azurim finished.

“If I may ask, father,” Nazar said, “how clear was your vision, concerning the task you gave us?”

“A very good, question.” Azurim answered. “Let me word your mission like this, you must find the man of my vision, and submit him to my will, whatever it takes, and as soon as possible.” He explained.

“Find?” Nazar inquired. “Do you expect him to be hiding, father?”

Azurim crossed his arms on the table and went silent for a moment, staring at Nazar. Then said “I don’t know who he is. I’ve seen many details about him, but I don’t know what his name is, I don’t know where he is. it will be one of your missions to find him.”

Nazar nodded. He *nodded,* as if he’d understood. Half of Pirran’s mind was occupied with his cursed ring. But the other half knew that Azurim is about to set them to search for a needle in a hay bale.

“what *can* you tell us about him?” Nazar asked. “Is he nobly born?”

“Yes.” Azurim confirmed.

“Is he old or young?”

“Around his twenties,” Devil answered.

“Is he tall or short? Fair or dark? He *is* male right?”

“He is a man, that’s all I can answer.” Azurim said, tiredly.

“One last question, father.” Nazar carefully added. Azurim motioned him to ask. “Are you sure?”

Azurim’s eyes widened and blazed with fury, and he slapped the table, Pirran wondered how it didn’t shatter. “You dare question me. Do you call me a liar?” he spat.

“forgive me, my lord.” Nazar said hurriedly, bowing his head deeply. “I didn’t mean to. I beg forgiveness.”

Pirran wormed back in his chair. He wished earth would swallow him just then. The edge of his vision has gone dark, and there was a bitter taste in his mouth.

“I just wanted to be sure it’s not like last time.” Nazar continued. “He certainly was not the one back then.”

“There was no Vision last time.” Azurim said, anger still burning in his eyes. “I tell you that he walks the land as we speak.” Nazar nodded.

Pirran cleared his throat, “Beg pardon, my lord.” He said hesitating, Azurim looked him in the eyes. Pirran was unconscious of the world outside that stare, he was convinced then that Devil knew his deepest secrets. Azurim gestured him to speak. “How would we know that we found him if we did?”

“I’ll leave you to answer this question on your own, Number Four of the Blue Rings.” Azurim said in a final way.

There was a long silence, Azurim looked to have lost interest in the world, Pirran found it hard to sit properly without fidgeting, he needed something to make him feel in control, and sufficed with picking his thumbnail with his forefinger’s. Tandon was staring into his cup.

“Do we have your leave to withdraw, father.” Nazar said.

“Ah, yes.” Azurim replied absentmindedly. “Join your men in the main hall. Quite a feast I offer. Rest and be on your business in the morrow.” And with that he stood and retreated to the door in the back of the room.

Tandon exhaled loudly, and Pirran closed his eyes, shivering. He only heard Louiy going sick a second time.

“Very well.” Nazar said. “We might as well feast, for our troubles to come.”

Only when Pirran reached the main hall, did he remember that his men were supposed to be camping outside the Dome where he left them. He spotted Khev; his lieutenant immediately. And walked toward him.

The hall was more than half full with the full number of the Blue Rings’ divisions. On each table was food enough to feed a village on Salvation’s Day. Chickens and turkeys, piglets and loaves of beef or lamb, soups of all possible colours, puddings and pies and tarts, chilled wine and warm honeyed milk, exotic fruits for curious eaters, and warm fresh bread for hungry ones. The hall was all more than well served, but there was not one servant in sight.

“Master?” Khev whispered to a gaping Pirran. “Everything alright? ‘d You meet him?”

“For that, We did.” Pirran answered.

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