

## ARCHANGEL – COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

### 13.1

"YOU SMELL THAT, sir? It's getting worse."

Michelle Sin, the newest of Ari's angels, had taken over driving duties from Ikeda. She wrinkled her nose at the acrid smell filling the cabin.

"I think we can see why," Ari said, pointing through the windshield.

An uneven orange glow was lighting up the dark sky. Ari frowned, worried. Had to be a pretty huge fire to make a glow that big, he thought.

He remembered the transit superintendent at Calumet City, the man's surprise that Ben and the girl were headed for Detroit. He should have taken the time to find out what was behind it.

*Too late now, Ari.*

They wallowed clumsily through a gigantic pothole. Muffled jeers spilled into the cab from the back of the truck.

"Sorry, sir," Sin muttered, wrestling with the wheel.

Ari said nothing. He stared out the passenger window at a stretch of deeper darkness running beside the road. He would bet terries to toenails there was a river out there. A big one. Disembodied lights shone out from what he suspected was the far bank.

The truck, which had been climbing up a long, gentle slope, crested the top and headed back down.

"Wow," Sin whistled.

Detroit rose up in front of them, its fences and watchtowers incandescent with light.

And backlit by fire. Dozens of buildings were ablaze. With a shock of recognition, Ari made out the vast shadows of what could only be golems, machines that had no business *inside* the boundaries of a metropolis. They were loping this way and that along the city's fence line.

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Streaks of light flashed out of what passed for their heads, and exploded against unseen targets on the ground. Flashes of gunfire peppered the darkness.

"Saviors protect us," Ari muttered.

Guardian Sin clung grimly to the wheel, her face pale.

"Stop the truck," he ordered.

The two-vehicle convoy came to a halt. Ari jumped down and walked to the back of the truck. Curious, worried faces peered out at him.

"I want three volunteers with rifles and full kit," he said. "You, you, and you," he ordered, pointing to three at random. "The rest of you, hold tight."

He raised his voice so the second truck could hear him.

"If you *have* to get out of the vehicle for any reason," he roared, "*don't leave the ravaging road!* There are golems up ahead." He ignored the gasps of disbelief. "I don't know what they're doing up there, but the one thing we know about golems is they won't hit the road. The road is *always* safe. We have to assume that everything else is not. I don't want someone getting blasted because they left the highway to go pee. *Are we clear?*"

"CRYSTAL!" came the massed reply.

Satisfied, Ari surveyed his three "volunteers." They were looking at him expectantly.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked gruffly. "Let's go for a walk."

He set off toward the city, praying to the Saviors he was right about the road being safe.

"Hell on Earth!" said a guardian. "Would you look at *that!*"

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Something had flared from the dark streets beyond the fires, striking a golem in the chest. Ari watched in shocked fascination as jets of flame exploded from the machine's armored casing. It took a few, increasingly uncertain steps and then stopped, toppling slowly and majestically onto its side, tearing up dozens of meters of razor wire. Its collapsing body set off landmines that shattered its head and blew off one of its arms.

One of his guardians unshouldered her rifle.

"Don't," Ari ordered.

They got within 100 meters of the gate before someone spotted them. Ari shielded his eyes against the glare of a searchlight.

"Halt!" shouted a nervous voice. "Who goes there?"

"Archangel Ari Kahn, Metropolis of Chicago. I have arrest warrants for two fugitives, and a writ of the Saviors granting me free passage."

"Are there more of you?"

"I have a half-choir back up the road, and another quarter due any time now."

There was a pause.

"Get out of here," shouted a different, more authoritative voice. "Come back at dawn. We'll process you then."

"Why not now?" Ari shouted back. "Maybe we can help."

"Maybe," the voice agreed. "But what if you're demons in disguise? Or djinn? It's not that I don't believe you, Archangel Kahn, but I've got my hands full right now, and I can't take the risk. Come back at dawn."

Ari swore, but without much malice. He'd probably do the same in the speaker's position. Besides,

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truth was, he had no urgent desire to fight something that could take down a golem with a single shot.

### 13.2

BEN WAS ASLEEP in the family apartments, light streaming in through his bedroom window. Daniel came in with a breakfast tray, except it was the girl somehow, smiling and rocking the bed like a cradle. The blade of her knife was pressed hard against his throat.

He came around, gasping desperately for breath. The air felt thick, and soupy, and unwilling to go into his lungs. His left side felt like it had been kicked by a horse.

"How are you feeling?" the girl asked, her voice anxious.

The world really *was* rocking from side to side, Ben decided. He suddenly remembered he was on a boat.

"Not so good," he said honestly. He tugged at his throat. "I can't breathe," he added, hoarsely.

He tried desperately to drag in more air, and coughed up blood instead.

"Oh Saviors," the girl muttered. "Saviors...."

The girl looked stricken. She was sitting at the bullet-scarred tiller, the first traces of daylight playing on her face. She had clearly been up all night. Her cheeks were streaked with tears. Her hair was splayed all over her shoulders, dampened to black with wind and water. And her leather jacket was hanging open and unkempt, revealing a bloodstained shirt underneath.

"Are you hit?" he asked.

The girl looked down, confused for a moment, before smiling faintly.

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"No," she said. "Not my blood. Yours."

He must have lost a lot of it. He put a hand gingerly to his left side. The girl had torn something into strips and bandaged him tight as a drum. A manna poultice had been forced into the wound. She'd done it more than once, by the look of it. Stained pieces of cloth lay littered about the boat. The latest bandage seemed to be dry, and for that he was grateful. He dragged in a hard-fought, spongy breath.

They must be making good progress, he thought. The wind was much stronger than it had been the night before, and the boat was heeled over to one side, pushed there by sail and creaking mast. Water rushed past the planking in a liquid chuckle.

It took him five minutes of struggling over the girl's objections to heave himself upright. His head swam with the effort, and he coughed up more blood but, once there, he had enough strength to stay that way. The boat was racing along a vast but narrowing river, split in two by the dark barrels of a boom on their right hand side. The boom marked a boundary. The land on the right bank must belong to another metropolis.

Something large, and dark, and tentacled, briefly broke the surface beside them.

"What was that?" Ben asked, startled.

"Water golem," the girl explained. "Been tracking us for the last couple of hours." She shrugged her shoulders. "I hit the boom in the dark by mistake, and it's been with us ever since. We'll be fine," she assured him, "unless we try to cross over."

Ben ran his tongue over dry lips. They were dusty with smoke. He could taste it, he realized, but not smell it. His nose was too filled with the coppery aroma of his own blood. Looking ahead, he could see the enormous, ruined

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towers of what must be Old Detroit. Not quite as big as the Old City, maybe, but impressive nonetheless. A grey pall hung in the sky overhead.

Following his gaze, the girl said worriedly, "I think we're headed for trouble."

The smoke-stained sky needed no other comment. Ben concentrated on trying to breathe.

He must have slipped into unconsciousness again, because he awoke with a start, slumped against the side of the boat. What he saw made his jaw drop.

A golem lay toppled on the river bank ahead of them, wisps of smoke still rising from its shattered torso, its legs wrapped up in torn-out pieces of the city's fence line. And Detroit had a *lot* of fence. It actually ran along the river bank, cutting the water off from the land. There was nowhere to come ashore.

Narrowing though it was, the river was still hundreds of meters wide. It made the Chicago River look like a trickle. It was littered with wrecked ships, some burned to the waterline, others cut free from their moorings and allowed to drift. The girl sailed skillfully past them, tacking toward the tall ruins of the Ravager towers. The fencing stopped there, Ben saw, giving way to row upon row of deserted quays and warehouses.

He coughed up more blood.

"Not long now," the girl tried to assure him. "We'll get ashore and find you some help. Bound to be a manna tree at least."

Her voice trembled with ill-concealed worry.

Someone must have seen them approaching, because a cluster of figures had gathered on the docks, waiting for them.

Everything was going blurry.

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"Our papers show us as Detroiters returning from Fort Wayne," Ben gasped. The world was starting to go dark around the edges. "Anyone asks, it was a failed business trip to import grain. We got jumped by djinn on the road, fled to the river, and commandeered a boat. We're glad to be home. Our papers are in order, so everything should be smooth."

*Unless Uncle Ari's at the transit post,* he thought darkly.

He didn't share his fears with the girl. Detroit wasn't Defiance, he told himself. It was a big city, and his uncle couldn't have gotten here before the middle of last night. It was barely morning. Formidable as Uncle Ari was, he just couldn't navigate the bureaucracy that fast.

Or could he?

The girl dumped the sail, leaving the boat to coast smoothly toward one of the smaller quays. As the vessel slowed to a crawl, she hurled the mooring lines to waiting dockworkers, and braced herself for the soft thud of the hull against the dock. Expertly done though it was, the impact made Ben wince with pain.

Exhausted-looking angels in full combat gear, their faces smeared with soot and sweat, watched the proceedings from a distance. Two of them, their well-used rifles slung over hard shoulders, started to walk across, their expressions all business.

Ben could no longer bring himself to pray to the Saviors. But as he slipped into unconsciousness, he hoped fervently that the approaching angels were from Detroit and not Chicago.