

Tales of Rhom

Threads of Fate

Book One

John Greer

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Johnathan Greer

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The Keeper

Aurelios found the first words already waiting beneath his pen.

I stood beneath the gaze of the Pantheon.

He read the line twice. Around his desk, shelves rose beyond the reach of the lamps. The books on them held different hands, different tongues. Some lives reached him in the voices of those who lived them. Others came through the people they touched, gathered a little at a time. He kept the words as he received them. They were often all that remained of someone.

On the shelf nearest his chair stood a narrow volume with no name on its spine. He had marked it himself, once. The mark was gone now, and the pages were empty.

A scar crossed the palm of the hand he rested on it.

There had been someone in those pages. He could remember the effort of holding on, but not whom he had lost. Whatever had struck through the life had reached its witnesses too. He had searched for one thing it had missed: a name in another hand, an object retaining its old place in the world. He had found nothing.

He put the empty book back.

The new page held a field, a river, a girl with charcoal on her fingers. Farther along its margin, a fine dark line led toward a place the ink would not enter.

Aurelios followed it with the pen. The nib caught. Pain ran through the old scar, and a drop of blood fell beside the girl's drawing.

He lifted his hand before it could fall again.

The books recorded choices. They did not give him leave to make them. He could not turn a killing stroke aside by writing a kinder sentence. Even a damaged record could be restored only from something the damage had not reached; an ended life was another matter.

The page turned beneath his fingers.

In Ashfall Court, the king extended a scroll.

Aurelios took up the pen.



PART ONE

Dizmodeus

The Fallen Herald



CHAPTER 1

The Order

Sunlight spilled through the stained-glass windows of Ashfall Court, laying gold across the polished floor. I stood beneath the gaze of the Pantheon with my spear upright and my wings folded close. Four centuries of service had taught me the proper stance. Still, I had to steady my breath before I spoke.

Lyriel sat to the left of the dais. Her rose-gold hair fell over the arms of her throne, and the light gathered softly around her hands. Of the three, she was the most beloved. Mortals prayed to Aureon for guidance and Thalor for justice, but when a child grew feverish in the night, they called for the Lady of Grace.

Thalor wore his armor even here. Blackened steel enclosed his broad frame, leaving the old scars along his jaw and throat exposed. His dark hair was bound behind his head. I had stood beside him in battle and watched armies find courage simply because he had drawn his sword.

That morning, his sword lay across his knees.

At the center sat Aureon, King of the First Light.

Living gold ran through his white cloak. His halo hung above him like a crown hammered from the sun, too bright to look at directly. Once, when I was newly raised, I had asked another Herald how one learned to endure his presence.

“You do not,” she had told me. “You learn to be grateful for it.”

I had been grateful for nearly four hundred years.

Aureon’s golden eyes settled on me, and for an instant I saw something I had no name for in that room.

Fear.

It passed before I could be sure. I lowered my gaze, ashamed of the thought.

“Seventh Herald.”

His voice carried to every corner of the court without rising.

“My lord.”

“There is a village called Ember Hollow.”

I searched my memory. Farmland. A river. A modest chapel whose prayers sometimes reached the western watch.

“I know the place.”

“A darkness has taken root there. You will descend at once.”

Aureon extended his hand. A narrow scroll formed between his fingers, its seal still molten. I climbed the steps to receive it.

Thalor’s jaw tightened. Lyriel watched the light moving across the floor.

The scroll was warm against my palm.

EXTERMINATION ORDER

To Dizmodeus, Seventh Herald of Heaven.

By the authority of the Pantheon, you are commanded to purge the settlement known as Ember Hollow and all persons within its bounds. Leave no habitation standing and no remnant of its heresy or corruption to endanger the people of Rhom.

The sentence is to be fulfilled before first light.

I read it twice.

In four centuries I had broken sieges, hunted things that wore human faces, and carried children out of cities we had failed to defend. Never had I been given an order that made no distinction between a cradle and a sword.

“All persons, my lord?”

“The decree is exact.”

I looked up. “What signs should I seek?”

Aureon’s expression did not change.

“Your task is to carry out the sentence.”

There were questions I might have asked then. I have lived with them longer than I care to count.

Instead, I rolled the parchment closed.

“By your command, my king.”

As I turned, Thalor spoke.

“Dizmodeus.”

I stopped. He almost never used my name in court.

His hand rested on the hilt of his sword. For a moment I thought he would rise.

“Be certain of your duty.”

I bowed to him as well.

Then I went to do it.

* * *

Cold cloud washed across my face. I folded my wings and dropped through it, the fields of Rhom opening beneath me in broad green strips.

A river curved around a low hill. Cottages followed its banks, their chimneys smoking. Beyond them, farmers worked the last rows before evening while children chased one another through the stubble.

I spread my wings above the road and settled onto the packed earth.

Small white flowers opened around my boots.

The flowers followed the light invested in me. Usually I welcomed the small pleasure they gave people. That evening I looked down at them and remembered what I had been sent to do.

A woman in the nearest field straightened, shielding her eyes. When she saw my wings, she put down her basket and bowed. I raised a hand to her, and soon people were waving all along the road.

The decree rested beneath my breastplate.

Something tugged at my cloak.

“HI, MISTER!”

A boy had both fists full of the fabric. One knee showed through his trousers. He was staring up at me with an expression I ordinarily encountered only on the faces of people who had just been rescued.

I knelt.

“What is your name, friend?”

He forgot it for a moment.

“Trala,” he said at last, standing very straight.

“A pleasure, Trala.”

“Can you fly?”

I glanced over my shoulder at my wings.

He followed my gaze, considered the matter, and nodded gravely.

“Right.”

A woman called from a cottage beyond the field.

“I believe you are being summoned,” I told him.

“That’s my mum.”

“Then you had better answer her.”

He laughed and ran, looking back twice before he reached her.

At the rise stood a weathered sign.

EMBER HOLLOW

WHERE LIGHT IS WITHIN US ALL

I passed beneath it with the king's order against my heart.

From the crest, I could see most of the village. A waterwheel turned below the bridge. Someone had hung blue sheets between two houses. The forge stood open beside the chapel, and the air smelled of hot iron, bread, and the river mud exposed by a dry week.

I let my awareness spread.

Celestial sight was less like seeing than listening beneath a conversation. I could feel the old ache in a farmer's hip, the worry of a woman counting coins, the brief sharp flare of a quarrel behind a shuttered window. Such things belonged to living people. They were no evidence of corruption.

I searched beneath them for the cold that accompanied the Abyss.

Nothing answered.

"You're late."

A girl sat under an ash tree beside the millstream. Her silver hair was gathered into a braid that had nearly escaped its ribbon. Charcoal smudged the end of her nose.

"You take your time, Diz."

I stopped.

Mortals called me Herald. A few priests knew my full name. Nobody in a village I had never visited had any reason to shorten it.

"I wasn't aware I had an appointment."

"You always arrive earlier in the dreams."

She shut the book on her knees and stood.

"I'm Lyra."

"And who told you my name?"

"You did. Sometimes. In dreams." She frowned at her own explanation. "We've only just met properly."

I could find no malice in her expression. That ought to have comforted me.

"May I see your book?"

She offered it at once.

The first drawing was of an angel kneeling in a field. His shoulders bowed beneath a sky full of falling stars.

The small split in his left eyebrow was mine.

I turned the page.

An eye hung above dark water, so large that its upper curve vanished beyond the edge of the paper. Next came a figure in a blue cloak, then a

woman with a deer's face and antlers branching above her brow. A silver feather filled another page. Between them were runes I knew and several I did not.

Near the back, a man sat writing at a desk. Shelves crowded around him and dwindled into a distance the page should not have held.

I looked up.

"Who is this?"

"He doesn't look up much."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"I don't think he can hear me."

A voice called from farther down the lane. Lyra reached for the book.

"That's supper. I promised Mum I'd do the plates. I forgot."

I gave it back.

"You are quite the artist."

Her smile arrived quickly, with an ordinary child's pleasure at being praised.

"Thank you. You can look at the others later."

She hurried away, tucking the book beneath her arm.

I remained under the tree until I could no longer hear her footsteps.

"Aureon," I whispered, "guide my path."

The waterwheel kept turning.

* * *

The blacksmith waved me toward his forge before I could pass.

"What brings a gold-touched to our bit of mud?"

He had arms like roof beams and a burn across the back of one hand. A repaired scythe lay on his bench. While I considered my answer, he wrapped its blade and handed it to an elderly woman waiting in the doorway.

She reached for her purse.

"Next harvest," he told her.

"You said that last harvest."

"Then you'll know the arrangement."

She left grumbling. He watched until she had stepped safely off the forge threshold, then turned back to me.

"Trouble?"

"I was sent to investigate a darkness."

The lie came easily. I disliked that.

He wiped his hands on his apron. “Here?”

“Have there been strangers? Sickness? Unusual happenings?”

“Unusual, certainly. But if you’re looking for misery, you’ve come a few years too late.”

“What changed?”

“Little Star started telling us when to bring the sheep in.”

He saw that I did not understand.

“Lyra. Lydia’s girl. Knows a storm before the clouds do. Knows which fields will take a frost. Last winter she had us making blankets for travelers who hadn’t left their homes yet.”

“And you believe her?”

“I didn’t at first.” He held up his burned hand. “She said the flue would split. I said I’d been tending a forge since before she was born. We each learned something about me.”

“Does she ask anything in return?”

He frowned.

“She’s twelve.”

Outside the chapel, the priest was kneeling on the roof, trying to fit a tile into place. He climbed down when he saw me, almost missed the bottom rung, and brushed mortar from his robes.

“Herald. We weren’t expecting—”

He stopped himself.

“Or perhaps we were.”

“Lyra?”

He nodded.

“Do your people worship her?”

The color drained from his face.

“No. No, never. The girl has asked us for nothing of the sort. We keep the rites. If there has been some failure in our observance—”

“Father.” I set a hand on his shoulder. “I am asking a question.”

“Yes.” He swallowed. “Of course.”

I had wanted the reassurance of hearing him say she was harmless. Instead, I found myself looking at the dent his ladder had worn in the earth. He had been repairing the roof of a house built to honor us, and I had frightened him half to death beneath it.

“The chapel is sound?” I asked.

“A leak above the Lady’s altar.”

I glanced up. One tile still waited beside the gap.

“May I?”

I flew up and set it for him. When I landed, he was smiling again. It would have been easier if he had not.

Farther along the river, a woman stood alone beside a small burial ground. She pressed a folded cloth between her hands until her knuckles whitened.

I nearly passed her. There were questions to answer, and the sun was already lowering.

Then she made a sound she was trying very hard to contain.

“Would you like someone to sit with you?” I asked.

Her husband’s name was Dyrall. He had died a year before. She told me he used to leave muddy boots in the kitchen and that she had hated it, and now she could not bring herself to clean the last pair.

I listened.

After a while, she rested her head against my shoulder.

I could have told her about the peace of the heavens. The words were familiar. I had spoken them at a hundred graves.

Instead, I asked what he had been like.

When she could speak of him without crying, I mentioned Lyra.

“She sat here too,” the woman said. “For days after he died.”

“Did she tell you anything?”

“Mostly about a frog she’d found.”

I looked at her.

“Everyone asks what she knows.” She folded the cloth again. “She thought I shouldn’t have to be alone.”

The sun slipped behind the chapel roof.

At the next cottage, an old man sat beneath an awning with a ledger open on his lap.

“You have been asking the village about our girl,” he said.

“I have.”

“Then come and read what she has actually told us.”

His front room smelled of dried apples and paper. Drawings covered one wall. He cleared a place on the table and set the ledger beneath the lamp.

The entries began when Lyra was five.

The western apple grove will bloom two weeks early.

Thirteen days early. We moved the hives in time.

Farther down:

Mrs. Holloway must not take the cow over the bridge tomorrow.

Axle broke on the crossing. Wagon lost. Nobody hurt.

At six, she had warned of a flood. At seven, a rockslide. At eight, the thirty-two travelers who would arrive without enough blankets for the winter.

The handwriting changed as I turned the pages. Dates grew more precise. The old man's notes became shorter.

Age ten. An angel wearing white will visit the village.

No visitor yet.

Age eleven. A great darkness watches from beyond the stars.

She would not sleep afterward.

The feather must survive.

No explanation.

The man at the end of time is still writing.

I am becoming worried about her.

The final entry was recent.

Age twelve. The Herald will stand with Ember Hollow.

Beneath it, the page was blank.

I had seen fear in Aureon's eyes that morning.

I looked again at the blank space beneath the entry. Whatever Aureon feared, he had sent me here to destroy it before I could understand it.