

SENTINELS OF THE MULTIVERSE ENSLAVED EIGHT



ENSLAVED EIGHT #7: BLINDING FAITH

"YOU LOOK TROUBLED," ALISSA SAID, SLIPPING INTO THE BARON'S ROOM. IVAN WAS STANDING ON HIS BALCONY, LOOKING OUT AND OVER THE FLICKERING ELECTRIC LIGHTS THAT CUT THROUGH THE DEEP SHADOW OF MORDENGARD NIGHT. THE LIGHT WAS PROOF OF CITIES HE HAD WRESTLED FROM SOVIET DERELICTION INTO THE MODERN ERA.

"YOU HAVE MORE EXPERIENCE WITH THE OCCULT THAN I," IVAN SAID. HE PAUSED. THERE WAS A GLASS OF SPIRITS IN HIS HAND AND HE RETURNED TO THE ROOM, Poured his sister a small neat glass and handed it to her. "DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?"

"AS IN A SINGULAR GOD, OR MANY?" SHE ASKED, ACCEPTING THE GLASS. "WE HAVE SEEN GODS, YOU AND I. FOUGHT THEM. WE EVEN SAW A GOD DIE."

"RA, YES. THE EGYPTIANS."

"QUITE."

"CAN ONE HAVE FAITH IN THE WAKE OF CERTAINTY?" IVAN ASKED, AND HIS SISTER, CURIOUS, STAYED SILENT. "I BECAME AGNOSTIC AS A CONTRARIAN OF THE SOVIETS AND THEIR STATE-SPONSORED ATHEISM. LATER, I LEFT THAT CHILDISH REASONING BEHIND IN THE WAKE OF SIMPLE EXPERIENCE."

"WE HAVE BEEN TO OTHER WORLDS," ALISSA NODDED. "WE HAVE FOUGHT ALONGSIDE AND AGAINST GODS."

"WE HAVE," IVAN AGREED. "SO, WHERE DOES ONE DRAW THE LINE? DOES GOD EXIST?"

"MANY DO," ALISSA SHRUGGED. "FEW ARE OF ANY REAL IMPORT. WHAT BOTHERS YOU THIS NIGHT?"

HE PAUSED, LOOKING AT HIS SISTER. THEY HAD FALLEN INTO AN EASY COMRADERIE, AND IT BOTHERED HIM TO THINK THAT HE COULD NOT IMAGINE HIS LIFE WITHOUT HER AT THIS POINT. HE KNEW SHE SHARED THE SAME MISGIVINGS, BOTH OF THEM USED TO SOLITARY PURSUITS AND NOW RELYING ON ONE ANOTHER AS SOBER SECOND THOUGHT.

SHE SHOULD KNOW.

"LEGACY'S ALLIES SOMETIMES HAVE AN ANGEL AMONG THEM," IVAN SAID THE WORDS SLOWLY. "SHE IS, SO FAR AS I KNOW, AN ACTUAL ANGEL -- A GIRL WHO DIED AND WAS REBORN WITH WINGS, WHO FOUND WEAPONS IN PERU THAT BELONGED TO THE ANCIENT TEMPLAR ORDER. I'VE LOOKED INTO HER AS MUCH AS I CAN, AND EVERYTHING SHE CLAIMS SHE IS APPEARS TO BE TRUE."

"I AM... FAMILIAR WITH HER," ALISSA FROWNED. "WE'VE HAD BRIEF ALTERCATIONS. SHE WAS FACING AGAINST A GROUP OF VAMPIRES CALLING THEMSELVES THE COURT OF BLOOD."

"I'VE HEARD OF THEM."

"THEY ARE MONSTROUS." ALISSA SIGHED AND FINISHED THE DRINK IN HER HAND. "WHAT WOULD YOU KNOW OF HER? IS SHE AN ANGEL?"

"YES."

"NO."

IVAN PAUSED, STARING AT HER. "YOU SOUND VERY CERTAIN."

"I AM," ALISSA NODDED. "SHE DOES NOT KNOW IT, BUT SHE'S PART OF A GROUP OF BEINGS CALLED THE HOST. ULTRATERRESTRIALS OPERATING AS SPIRITUAL CONCEPTS. SHE, A SPIRIT OF JUDGMENT, ENTERED THE BODY OF A DEAD GIRL AND BECAME THAT DEAD GIRL."

"SHE IS STARTING TO COME AFTER US, I THINK."

"THEN WE MUST DEAL WITH THAT." ALISSA PAUSED, HELD OUT HER CUP AND LET IVAN REFILL IT. "I THINK I HAVE AN IDEA. MY SHADOW?"

WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE WRAITH EMERGED FROM THE SHADOWS, CRAWLING TO HIS SISTER'S SIDE AND KNEELING, HER HEAD BOWED.

"I WILL HAVE NEED OF YOU FOR THIS." ALISSA RAN HER HAND THROUGH THE MESSY TANGLE OF THE WRAITH'S HAIR, CUPPED HER CHEEK LOVINGLY. THE WRAITH SAID NOTHING; SHE HAD NOT BEEN GIVEN LEAVE TO SPEAK. "WOULD YOU LIKE A PET ANGEL, BROTHER? TO MAKE UP FOR ALL THOSE BIRTHDAYS WE WERE APART."

"I WOULD," HE SAID.



FANATIC.

THAT'S WHAT THEY CALLED HER. THE FAITHLESS. THE DEMONS. THE MONSTERS. THE SINNERS. *FANATIC*. AS IF BY INSULTING HER FAITH THEY COULD MAKE THEMSELVES SUPERIOR AND CLEANSE THE DAMNATION FROM THEIR SOULS.

SHE KNEW BETTER.

HER NAME WAS HELENA. A NUN HAD NAMED HER. SHE HAD BEEN KILLED AS A CHILD, RUN OVER BY A TRUCK. SHE HAD RISEN FROM DEATH WITHOUT A SCRATCH, BONES KNITTING THEMSELVES TOGETHER. THE DOCTORS WERE TERRIFIED BY THE MIRACLE OF HER RECOVERY. SHE HAD BEEN A CHILD AND SHE HAD SEEN THE GLORY OF HEAVEN AND NONE OF THEM COULD UNDERSTAND -- SHE BARELY UNDERSTOOD. SHE HAD A DIVINE MISSION. SHE HAD NO PARENTS, NO FAMILY, SO SHE HAD ASKED TO BE REMANDED INTO THE CUSTODY OF A CHURCH.

SHE HAD STUDIED THERE, COME INTO THE FIRES OF ADOLESCENCE. OTHER GIRLS AND ORPHANS CAME INTO THE WORRIES OF SEXUAL MATURITY. SHE CAME INTO THE GLORY OF HER WINGS AND THE SEARING MIGHT OF HEAVEN. SHE HAD DEMANDED THE NUNS DO MORE THAN HIDE BEHIND THEIR WALLS BUT THEIR STRENGTH HAD NOT BEEN STRONG ENOUGH TO BEAR HER. *FANATIC*. DISGUSTED, SHE LEFT THEM.

HER FAITH LED HER TO A SECRET ENCLAVE PREPARED BY THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR CENTURIES AGO, FAR FROM THEIR BASE OF POWER IN FRANCE AND UNDISTURBED IN THE CENTURIES SINCE. SHE FOUND THEIR ARMS AND ARMOR AND TEXTS, LEARNING TO FIGHT, LEARNING THE MISSION, LEARNING HER PURPOSE. SHE LEFT THE INNOCENCE OF GIRLHOOD BEHIND AND ACCEPTED HER DUTY AS A LITERAL ANGEL OF THE LORD. SHE TOOK UP ARMS AND ARMOR.

ON THE DAY SHE LEFT, SHE AWOKE COVERED IN BLOOD, A LONGSWORD BESIDE HER MARKED WITH THE SCRIPT OF HEAVEN.

IT WAS A SIGN OF GOD'S FAVOR. HER MISSION HAD BEGUN. HER DESTINY WAS TRUE.

THERE WERE SO MANY CRIMES AND CRIMINALS IN THIS WORLD, SO MANY INNOCENTS. SHE PROTECTED THE LATTER AND SENT THE FORMER TO THEIR FINAL REWARD. SHE STARTED WITH SMALL THINGS BUT REALIZED THAT SHE WAS MEANT FOR GREATER THINGS, WEIGHTIER CONFLICTS. SHE FLEW AROUND THE WORLD, HELPING OTHER HEROES AND PARAGONS, UNCOVERING DECEIT, LIARS, CORRUPTERS. SO MANY WHO ACTED IN THE NAME OF GOD. SO MANY THAT DREW THE INNOCENT INTO CORRUPTION.

SHE BROUGHT WITH HER THEIR REWARD -- PURIFYING FLAME AND HOLY SWORD.

THEY DIED SCREAMING.

WHEN PEOPLE ASKED HER WHO SHE WAS SHE TOLD THEM THE TRUTH: SHE WAS AN ANGEL OF THE LORD. BUT SHE COULD HEAR THE WHISPERS IN HER WAKE -- *FANATIC*. THOSE SHE SAVED. THOSE SHE HUNTED. THOSE SHE KILLED. HER ALLIES. HER ENEMIES. *FANATIC*.

SHE STOOD SIDE BY SIDE WITH THE GREATEST CHAMPIONS IN ALL OF CREATION WHEN OBLIVAEON CAME TO END THE WORLD AND ONE OF HER CLOSEST FRIENDS DIED IN HER ARMS. HE HELD THE MONIKER OF AN

EGYPTIAN GOD BUT SHE HAD LEARNED HE WAS A MORTAL MAN WITH A POWERFUL RELIC, SOME ANCIENT MAGIC FROM A BYGONE AGE. SHE COULD NOT HELP HIM, ONLY SOOTHE HIS PASSING. HIS FINAL WORDS HAD BEEN FOR HER: "I HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED IN YOU."

FANATIC.

THAT'S WHAT THEY CALLED HER. SHE ACCEPTED IT. THAT WOULD BE HER NAME, HER TITLE.

HER JUDGMENT.

AND THEN SOME OF THE CHAMPIONS SHE KNEW WENT MISSING. THE WRAITH. THE HARPY. TACHYON. UNITY. THERE WAS A LARGER GAME AT PLAY. SHE HUNTED DOWN THE LIKES OF APOSTATE, THE COURTS OF BLOOD, EVEN THE SEER. IT WAS THE LATER THAT HAD BROUGHT HER TO THE DAMNED NATION MEN CALLED MORDENGARD AND ITS THRICE-DAMNED RULER, THE BARON BLADE.

FOR SEVEN DAYS AND SEVEN NIGHTS SHE INVESTIGATED THE BORDERLANDS OF THIS NATION, LEARNING ALL SHE NEEDED TO. SHE WAS CERTAIN OF THE BARON'S GUILT. SHE HAD EVERYTHING SHE NEEDED TO BRING HIM TO JUSTICE. SHE WAS FLYING NOW, FLYING TO THE CAPITAL OF THIS NATION. THE CASTLE WAS IN SIGHT. SHE WOULD FIND THE MORTAL MAN IVAN RAMONAT AND SHE WOULD RESCUE HER ALLIES AND THEY WOULD, ALL OF THEM, KNOW JUDGMENT.

"HOLD, FANATIC!"

SHE LOOKED. THERE. ON THE PARAPETS, A WOMAN WITH A SWORD STOOD TREMBLING, SALUTING HER. SHE FLEW DOWN TO THE WOMAN, HER OWN SWORD IN HAND, HER HALO BRIGHT AS THE SUN.

"WHAT WOULD YOU, MORTAL?" FANATIC DEMANDED.

"A DUEL," THE WOMAN ASKED. "FOR MY SOUL, A DUEL."

FANATIC LOOKED INTO THE WOMAN'S SOUL AND FOUND HER WORTHY. SHE LOOKED AROUND AND SAW NONE OF THE BARON'S TRICKY TECHNOLOGICAL TRAPS WAITING FOR HER. SHE TOUCHED DOWN, SALUTING THE WOMAN -- HER COURAGE, HER BRAVERY.

"HOW ARE YOU CALLED?" FANATIC ASKED.

"WREN," THE WOMAN SAID, EYES WIDE, HAND SHAKING. SHE WANTED THIS SO BADLY. "WREN SLAYER."

"I WILL PRAY OVER YOU AFTER YOU HAVE FALLEN," FANATIC SAID, AND THEN SHE ATTACKED.

THE MORTAL WAS GOOD, A FINE EXAMPLE OF MORTAL TRAINING AND SKILL. SHE WAS FAST AND QUICK AND POWERFUL. SHE KNEW HER SWORD AS AN EXTENSION OF HERSELF AND, SHOULD SHE HAVE FACED ANOTHER MORTAL, FANATIC BELIEVED SHE WOULD HAVE WON -- BUT SHE DID NOT FACE A MORTAL. SHE STOOD ACROSS AND IN THE WAY OF AN ANGEL OF THE LORD, AND IT DID NOT TAKE FANATIC LONG TO PUT THE WOMAN IN HER PLACE, TO STRIKE HER DOWN TO THE EARTH.

"YIELD, WORTHY ADVERSARY, THAT YOU MIGHT FIND A BETTER CAUSE TO DEVOTE YOURSELF TO," FANATIC DECLARED. "I WOULD NOT SEE YOU FALL FOREVER THIS DAY."

"I WILL NEVER YIELD!" WREN TREMBLED, LIFTING HER CHIN AND EXPOSING HER THROAT.

"I WILL PRAY FOR YOU WHEN YOU ARE GONE," FANATIC HYMNED, AND THRUST FORWARD.

AND STUMBLED BECAUSE HER SWORD WAS GONE.

"WOW, THIS IS SO COOL!"

SHE LOOKED BEHIND HER. ANOTHER MORTAL, THIS ONE IN RUMPLED FINERY, HELD A HALF-EMPTY BOTTLE OF SOURED GRAPES IN ONE HAND AND HER SWORD IN THE OTHER. HE WAS STARING AT IT IN WONDER.

"HOLY SHIT!" HE SAID, HIS EYES GOING WIDE. "ARE YOU A REAL LIFE ANGEL? FOR SERIOUS?"

"MORTAL, I KNOW NOT HOW YOU HAVE DONE THIS THING, BUT YOU WILL GIVE ME BACK WHAT IS MINE," FANATIC THREATENED. THE DRUNKARD HELD UP HIS HANDS, STRUGGLING TO LIFT HER WEAPON.

"YEAH, NO, COME AND TAKE IT, I'M NOT A FIGHTER," THE MAN STAMMERED, TAKING A STEP BACKWARDS AND DRAGGING HER SWORD ON THE GROUND. SHE SCOWLED AT HIM, FLEW TO HIM, SNATCHED IT FROM HIS GRASP.

WAS SHOT IN THE SHOULDER.

"WHAT TREACHERY IS THIS?!" SHE DEMANDED. SHE COULD FEEL THE LIGHT AND WARMTH OF HOLY FIRE SIMMERING IN HER EYES, HER HALO AND WINGS FLARING UP AND OUT. AN OLD MAN WAS STARING DOWN AT HER WITH A LARGE RIFLE. HE FIRED AT HER AGAIN AND SHE PARRIED IT WITH HER BLADE, PARRIED IT AGAIN AND TOOK TO THE AIR, FLEW TO HIM.

WAS CAUGHT IN A WINDING MASS OF OBSIDIAN TENDRILS.

THEY SLIPPED UNDER HER ARMOR, OVER HER SKIN, DRAGGING HER, PRESSING HER, SLITHERING AROUND HER. SHE ROARED IN FURY, LOOKING WILD FOR THEIR SOURCE. A POOL OF DARKNESS RIPPLED BELOW HER, BIRTHING THE TENDRILS, AND AT ITS FOOT WAS A BOUND WOMAN, ON HER KNEES, INVOKING SOME PROFANITY.

"HOW DARE YOU," FANATIC SEETHED. HER HOLY FLAME CUT THROUGH THE DARKNESS, GIVING HER BACK CONTROL AS SHE FLEW TOWARDS THE SACRIFICE, THE MAGUS, HER ENEMY.

THE WOMAN WAS BOUND, HANDS ENCASED IN THICK GLOVES, BLINDFOLDED, HER HANDS SPREAD AND TIED TO POSTS, HER LEGS BOUND TOGETHER. SHE LOOKED LIKE AN OFFERING, LIKE SHE WAS OFFERING HERSELF TO DARK POWERS. HER HAIR AND SKIN WERE MATTED WITH SWEAT, EYES CONCEALED BEHIND A STRIP OF LEATHER, HER LIPS PARTED, PANTING AND WET.

"FANATIC," THE WOMAN GASPED, AND THE ANGEL COULD SEE THE STRAIN OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND CONTROL. THIS WOMAN WAS A POWER, PERHAPS, BUT SHE WAS ONLY MORTAL.

"YOU CANNOT STOP AN ANGEL OF THE LORD," FANATIC SAID. "YOU CANNOT STOP JUDGMENT."

THE WOMAN SMILED.

TENDRILS SWARMED FORTH, WRAPPING AROUND FANATIC, ATTEMPTING TO WRESTLE HER, BIND HER. SHE WAS PULLED TO THE EARTH, PULLED TO THE SIDE, HER SWORD PULLED FROM HER HANDS. SHE BURNED THEM WITH THE POWER OF HER FAITH, CUTTING THROUGH THE DARKNESS WITH HOLY LIGHT AND FLAME, BUT STILL THE TENDRILS CAME. STILL THE TENDRILS WERE DESTROYED.

HER ARMOR WAS RIPPED. THE CLOTH BENEATH IT TORN. THE TENDRILS SLITHERED AROUND HER HEAD, DOWN AND ACROSS HER FLESH, CIRCLING HER BREASTS, HER HIPS, HER BELLY. THEY TRIED TO DRIVE THE AIR FROM HER LUNGS. THEY TRIED TO TEASE HER. SHE WAS SHOCKED -- NOT THAT THIS WAS HAPPENING, BUT THAT ANYONE WOULD DARE TRY AND DO THIS TO HER.

"YOU WILL BURN IN HELL FOR ETERNITY," FANATIC PROMISED.

THE WOMAN SAID NOTHING.

A SURGE OF HOLY FIRE CUT THROUGH THEM, FREEING FANATIC. A WAVE AND A RIPTIDE OF DARKNESS CAUGHT HER AS SHE ROSE INTO THE AIR, PULLED HER DOWN, TRIED TO PULL HER UNDER. SHE FOUGHT FREE.

THERE WAS A BRILLIANT PURPLE-PINK LIGHT.

"WHAT IS-?" SHE STARTED TO ASK.

SHE RECOGNIZED IT A MOMENT BEFORE IT STRUCK HER: BARON BLADE'S ORBITAL LASER. SHE COULD NOT DODGE. SHE COULD NOT MOVE. THE LIGHT ENVELOPED HER, AND THEN EVERYTHING WAS DARKNESS.



SHE AWOKE NAKED AND BOUND TO A WALL.

HER WRISTS WERE COVERED IN SOME KIND OF METAL SHE DID NOT KNOW, THE CHAINS RATTLING AS SHE

GOT TO HER FEET. SHE COULD MOVE AROUND A BIT. HER LEGS WERE FREE. SHE PULLED AT THE CHAINS AND A JOLT OF ELECTRICITY SHOT THROUGH HER, SHOCKING HER UNTIL SHE FELL STEAMING TO ALL FOURS.

"THAT WILL HAPPEN WHENEVER THE CHAINS ARE PULLED TAUT."

SHE GLARED AT THE SPEAKER, STOOD ON UNSTEADY FEET SO SHE COULD BETTER LOOK HIM IN THE EYE.

"BARON BLADE," SHE HISSED. "IVAN RAMONAT."

"I AM HE," IVAN SAID. HE WAS SITTING BEHIND A DESK OF COMPLEX ELECTRONICS THAT SHE DID NOT UNDERSTAND. MORE ELECTRONICS LOOMED OVER HER FROM BEHIND HIM. THE WOMAN WHO HAD BEEN BOUND WAS BOUND NO LONGER BESIDE HIM.

AND THE SWORDSWOMAN.

"FREE ME," FANATIC COMMANDED WREN. "THIS IS BENEATH YOU."

"NO, NO, NO IT'S NOT," SAID WREN. SHE STARTED TO PACE, FIDGET, NERVOUS. "I'M NOT SORRY. I'M NOT! YOU DESERVE THIS!!"

"SHHHH," IVAN SAID, GOING TO WREN AND HUGGING HER, SOOTHING HER. "IT'S OKAY. YOU'RE OKAY."

FANATIC STARED. THE WREN GIRL WAS TERRIFIED OF HER BUT TOOK SOLACE FROM THE VILLAIN'S MADNESS.

"THIS IS MADNESS," FANATIC DECLARED.

"IS IT?" THE WOMAN ASKED, THE ONE WHO HAD BEEN BOUND. "WE HAVE SHOWN HER AND ALL THE PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY ONLY KINDNESS. THE PEOPLE HERE HAVE THE HIGHEST STANDARD OF LIVING IN THE WORLD. THEY BELIEVE IN WHATEVER GODS THEY WISH. THEY ARE EDUCATED, HEALTHY, FULFILLED. NOWHERE ELSE ON EARTH WILL YOU FIND A COUNTRY SO CLOSE TO HEAVEN, AND YET YOU WOULD ATTACK US?"

"YOU ARE VILLAINS."

"ACCORDING TO WHO?" IVAN ASKED, LETTING WREN SIT IN HIS CHAIR AND TURNING TO FACE FANATIC'S JUDGMENT. "HAVE WE ATTACKED ANYONE? EVER? WE HAVE DEFENDED OURSELVES FROM OUTSIDE ATTACKS SUCH AS YOURS."

"I KNOW YOU HAVE THE WRAITH," FANATIC CHALLENGED. "I KNOW YOU HAVE THE HARPY, AND TACHYON, AND UNITY."

"THEY ATTACKED US, LIKE YOU DID," THE WOMAN SAID, AND SMILED. "AND THEY FOUND THE TRUTH OF THINGS FOR THEMSELVES. LET US HELP YOU, HELENA."

FANATIC GLARED AT HER AND SEETHED, PULLING HER CHAINS, TESTING THEM. SHE FELL AS SHE WAS SHOCKED, WINGS FLARING, TWITCHING AS SHE CURLED IN ON HERSELF.

IT HURT. IT HURT BUT SHE STOOD ANYWAY. PROUD AND DEFIANT.

"DO YOUR WORST."

THE SERRATED BLADES CUT THROUGH HER WINGS AND PINNED THEM TO THE WALL. FANATIC SCREAMED, TRIED TO FLAP HER WINGS, PULLED TO BREAK FREE. THE CASTLE SHUDDERED AS SHE FOUGHT AND PULLED. SHE CLOSED HER EYES, FOCUSING HER STRENGTH, HEARING THE CHAINS STRAIN TO HOLD HER.

A GENTLE TOUCH ON HER CHEEK..

"THERE IS A CLUSTER OF NERVES," THE WRAITH WHISPERED, PRESSING DOWN JUST BEHIND FANATIC'S JAW, "RIGHT HERE."

FANATIC BUCKLED. SHE BUCKLED. PAIN AND PLEASURE WARRIED WITHIN HER BODY, THE WRAITH HAUNTING HER WITH GHOSTLY TOUCHES, TRACING HER MUSCULATURE, HER NERVOUS SYSTEM, DRUMMING ON NERVES, HEIGHTENING PLEASURE AND PAIN. SHE SCREAMED AND EVEN SHE DIDN'T KNOW IF IT WAS FROM AGONY OR ECSTASY AND THE WRAITH WAS JUST GETTING STARTED. FANATIC GATHERED HER STRENGTH, HATING THE WEAKNESS IN HER QUESTION, HER PLEA:

"WHY ARE YOU...?"

"SHHH."

THE WRAITH TOUCHED HER LIPS, KISSED HER, THE HAND THAT WAS ON HER LIPS CIRCLING HER CHEEKS. SHE FELT COOL TO FANATIC'S FEVER, A BALM TO THE WEIGHT OF FANATIC'S FAITH. THE WRAITH DIDN'T PULL, OR TUG, OR HURT. GENTLE PRESSES WITH LIGHT FINGERS AND FANATIC WAS PANTING, WHIMPERING, UNSURE WHETHER SHE WANTED TO NEEDED MORE.

FANATIC BEGGED THE WRAITH NO TO REMOVE HER ARMOR BUT THE WRAITH DID IT ANYWAY, ONE BUCKLE AND STRAP AT A TIME, TRAILING SMALL KISSES AND SMALLER TOUCHES ON EACH REVEALED BIT OF FLESH. FANATIC WAS NOT USED TO THIS, HAD NEVER BEEN TOUCHED LIKE THIS, AND TRAPPED TO ENDURE THIS VICIOUS SEDUCTION SHE DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO. HER SKIN BURNED, HER SKIN CRAWLED, SHE WANTED THE WRAITH TO STOP AND PRESSED HER BODY TOWARDS THOSE FINGERS, THOSE TEASING FINGERS, THOSE QUESTIONING FINGERS AND THOSE WET WET LIPS...

"LET THERE BE," IVAN RAMONAT SAID, AND THE WALLS AROUND THEM SPRUNG TO LIGHT AND LIFE.

SHE HADN'T EVEN KNOWN HE WAS THERE. WATCHING. WATCHING AS THE WRAITH TOUCHED HER, TRACED HER, CARVED RIVERS OF SWELTERING THROBBING DESIRE ACROSS HER FLESH.

AND YET.

AND YET.

"HOW DO YOU KNOW HOW TO DO THIS?" ASKED FANATIC.

"A GOOD QUESTION," IVAN ECHOED.

"SHE WAS LIKE THIS WHEN I GOT HER," ALISSA SHRUGGED.

TELEVISIONS ON THE WALL SHOWED FANATIC VISIONS OF HERSELF, CAPTURED FOOTAGE OF HER ADVENTURES -- FACING OFF AGAINST... AGAINST... THERE WERE VILLAINS SHE HAD DESTROYED. THERE WERE. SHE COULD NOT REMEMBER THEM BUT THERE WAS A WORLD SHE HAD SAVED. WASN'T THERE?

ALL THE FOOTAGE ENDED UP FOCUSING ON THE ONES SHE FAILED.

BODIES IN THE WRECKAGE. WHOLE REALITIES TORN TO NOTHING. THE COUNTESS ELIZABETH BATHORY DRINKING HER BLOOD. APOSTATE AND THE SEER SLITHERING DOUBT INTO HER MIND AND COSTING HER SO MUCH, COSTING HER TO FAIL THOSE WHO WOULD THEN LOSE EVERYTHING. SHE SAW THEIR SUFFERING. SHE SAW THE PAIN THEY ENDURED BECAUSE SHE FAILED.

THE WRAITH NEVER STOPPED TOUCHING HER, BUT THE SCALES SLIPPED TOWARDS PAIN OVER PLEASURE. SHE SHUDDERED, SHOOK, TRIED TO PULL AWAY BUT WAS TEASED BACK TO PLEASURE, STRUCK DOWN WITH PAIN, ONLY TO BE PUNISHED WITH PLEASURE ONCE MORE.

"I WOULDN'T DREAM OF LYING TO YOU," IVAN SAID, HIS TONE CONVERSATIONAL. "YOU HAVE DONE MORE GOOD FOR THIS WORLD THAN HARM, BUT YOU HAVE DONE HARM. YOU HAVE BEEN TRICKED BEFORE, AND IN YOUR GREAT STRUGGLE YOU FORGET THE INNOCENT THAT SUFFER IN YOUR WAKE."

"AND... A-AND YOU DOOOOOOOO BE... BET.AAAAAAAA.."

"YES," IVAN SAID, AND THE SCREEN CHANGED AGAIN, SHOWING HER THE PROOF. "I DO BETTER. I DO NOT FORGET ANYONE, NOT ONE SINGLE PERSON. I RESPECT THAT OTHER PEOPLE CHOOSE NOT TO LIVE UNDER MY PROTECTION, BUT THOSE THAT CHOOSE TO BE HERE ENJOY A HIGHER QUALITY OF LIFE THAN THEY WOULD ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD. SATISFACTION. HEALTH. EDUCATION. I PROVIDE THIS. I CRAFT IT. YOU MAY WANT TO BELIEVE OTHERWISE, BUT FACTS DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR FAITH."

THE WRAITH WAS PLEASURING HER AGAIN, RIDING HER TO A CRESCENDO AS THE IMAGES AROUND HER SHOWED THE PEOPLE OF MORDENGARD FLOURISHING -- FAMILIES TOGETHER AND SMILING, PEOPLE BEING EDUCATION FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD, PURSUING THEIR PASSIONS. THEY WERE HAPPY. ALL OF THEM WERE HAPPY.

PAIN FLARED UP AGAIN AS SHE SAW PEOPLE LEFT DEVASTATED AND BROKEN AFTER ATTACKS BY LEGACY, THE FREEDOM FIVE, LEGACY, HERSELF. SHE WHIMPERED AND TRIED TO CLOSE HER EYES AND LOOK AWAY BUT THE WRAITH AND HER TOUCHES WOULDN'T LET HER, FORCED HER EYES OPEN AS SHE MOANED AND CRIED, SHAKING, SO CLOSE, RIGHT ON THE EDGE, THE VERY VERGE OF



BROKEN PEOPLE BEING FIXED WITH PROSTHETICS THEY WOULD NEVER HAVE TO PAY FOR AND BEING TAUGHT HOW TO USE THEM. PEOPLE GETTING WHAT THEY NEEDED WHEN THEY NEEDED IT TO LIVE THEIR BEST LIVES, VIBRANT LIVES FULL OF CULTURE, MUSIC, CREATIVITY, LOVE.

"YOU DESERVE THIS," IVAN SAID. "YOU DESERVE TO BE LOVED."

FANATIC WHIMPERED, BEGGED, THE WRAITH SLAPPING HER THIGHS OPEN, SPREADING HER, EMBRACING HER, DRIVING HER MAD WITH NEED. SHE NEEDED THIS. SHE NEEDED THIS.

"YOUR RELIGION SAYS WOMEN AND ANGELS ARE SUBSERVIENT TO THE SONS OF ADAM," IVAN SAID. "WHAT ARE YOU?"

"SUB... SUBSERVIENT."

"TO WHOM...?"

"TO... T-TO...," SHE PAUSED, LOOKING AT HIM HE WAS STANDING ON A PODIUM, STARING DOWN AT HER WHILE IMAGES OF HER GREATEST FAILURES WASHED OVER THEM BOTH, BLANKETED THEM BOTH. THE WRAITH WAS STILL TOUCHING HER. THE WRAITH WAS STILL TOUCHING HER AND, IF SHE COULD HAVE, SHE WOULD HAVE PRESSED HER WHOLE BEING INTO THE WRAITH'S TALENTED HANDS. THE WRAITH MET HER EYES.

I PROMISE.

"I AM SUBSERVIENT TO THE SONS OF ADAM," WHIMPERED FANATIC, FINALLY. "I AM..."

SHE CAME.

SHE CAME AND SHE CAME AND SHE CAME.

THE WRAITH DROVE FANATIC TO BLISTERING HIGH OF PLEASURE, TO THE VISTA OF HEAVEN ITSELF.

AND, IN THE END, SHE STOOD BEFORE THE TAMED ANGEL, HOLDING THE SWORD ABSOLUTION IN HER HAND. SHE SALUTED ALISSA ELHAZRED AND BARON IVAN RAMONAT, BOWED HER HEAD AND SAID, SIMPLY:

"IT IS DONE."

NEXT ISSUE: MISSING THE NIGHT!!