Requiem Infernal

Peter Fehervari
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Darius Hinks

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CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
Warhammer 40,000
Dramatis Personae
Map
Exordium
Prologue
First Gospel
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Second Gospel
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Third Gospel
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Epilogue
Afterwyrd
About the Author
It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of His inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that He may never truly die.

Yet even in His deathless state, the Emperor continues His eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor’s will. Vast armies give battle in His name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.
'All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.'

– Antediluvian Terran heresy

'We are all shadows grasping for substance in the long nightmare of the soul.'

– Icharos Malvoisin
Chaplain Castigant, Angels Penitent
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Lost
Jonah Tythe – Imperial Preacher
Asenath Hyades – Sister Hospitaller (the Eternal Candle)
Athanazius – The Artisan

The Order of the Silver Candle
Hagalaz – Preceptor Cognostic
Navreen – Sister Dialogus (aide to Hagalaz)
Haruki – Sister Dialogus

The Order of the Bronze Candle
Akaishi Bhatori – Palatine Chirurgeon
Solanis – Mother Superior
Angelique – Medicae Servitor

The Order of the Iron Candle
Xhinoa Aokihara – Sister Celestian Superior
Indrik Thuriza – Sister Celestian
Genevieve – Sister Celestian
Camille – Sister Celestian
Marcilla – Sister Celestian

The Exordio Void Breachers – Darkstar Company
Ichukwu Lemarché – Commissar
Vanzyn Reiss – Lieutenant
Toland Feizt – Breach Sergeant
Bannon Pynbach – Breach Corporal
Chingiz Zevraj – Breacher
Avram Santino – Blast Breacher
Boldiszar Hörka – Blast Breacher
Konrad Glicke – Breacher
Rem Rynfeld – Breacher

The Providence Crusade

Father Deliverance – Imperial Confessor
Canoness Excruciant Morgwyn – Order of the Eternal Thorn
Commodore Barnabas Rand – Imperial Navy
Captain Varzival Czervantes – Ninth Rhapsody, the Angels Resplendent

The Virtues Illuminant

The Torn Prophet – Incarnate of Veritas
The Bleeding Angel – Incarnate of Clementia
The Harrowed Artisan – Incarnate of Humilitas
The Blind Watchman – Incarnate of Vigilans
The Penitent Knight – Incarnate of Temperans
The Burning Martyr – Incarnate of Caritas
The Mute Witness – Incarnate of Castitas
THE KORONATUS RING
Steel yourself, traveller, for the road you’ve chosen won’t be easy. You’ll find no joy and precious little glory along the way, let alone the hope of a better tomorrow at journey’s end. And if you crave immaculate answers you’d best turn back now, for such salves are for the innocent, the ignorant and the wilfully obtuse – those sleepwalkers who keep to the well-trodden avenues of life unto death. With backs straight or shoulders bowed, stirred by valour or crippled by fear, they march, stumble or crawl into oblivion in ignominious bliss. For ignorance is indeed bliss, even when it tastes of pain, just as bliss is always contemptible, even when seized with courage.

Only Truth cuts deep enough to warrant respect.

But you already know this, with your heart if not your head, else you’d never have stepped onto this coiled and thorny road. Few are farsighted enough to glimpse my trail and fewer still are capable of finding me, but those who prevail cannot do otherwise. No, don’t deny it, for the hunger in your eyes belies your hesitation! You’ve seen and sacrificed too much to be sated by the false idleness of faith or reason. Nothing less than honesty will suffice for you now.

But therein lies the first and most fundamental terror that I must share with you: Truth is a manifold and slippery beast. It grew frayed when the first minds gazed upon their world with displeasure and asked ‘Why?’ – then went to war in the name of ‘No!’ Over the aeons Truth has unravelled
and entangled itself by turns, wracked into disorder by the passions of those who would hunt, cage, codify and exalt it. But their quest is a futile one, for they have always been chasing their own tails. And their tails are barbed.

– Anonymous
‘Don’t go out tonight, father,’ Mina said. It wasn’t a protest or a plea. Her voice was too lifeless for that.

‘I’ll be back before lockdown,’ Jonah answered, keeping his back to her as he slotted a clip into his stubby handgun. Not much troubled Mina anymore, but guns agitated her so he kept the weapon hidden in their hovel’s vent-duct, along with the other tools of his shadow life. With its walls plastered in mouldering prayer scrolls and its windows sealed behind iron shutters, their cubicle was more like a penitent’s cell than a living space, yet it cost Jonah most of what he made on the militia watch. Without the extra he scraped together between shifts they’d have been lost. Even so, they were down to their last ration cans and a few precious lumen sticks again. Their power had been cut months ago, diverted to the lights encircling the fortified hab-block where they’d taken sanctuary. Only the militia chiefs who lorded it over the top tiers still tapped into the generators.

‘It’s a bad night,’ Mina pressed vaguely.

The absurdity of that made Jonah smile, which shamed him because it mocked her and she deserved better. She never left their shelter, but even if she did, she wouldn’t – couldn’t – see the truth of things. The fear that had hollowed her out during the first weeks of their ordeal wouldn’t allow it.

That’s how she survives, Jonah thought, slipping the gun under his heavy
greatcoat, alongside the cloth-wrapped book strapped to his chest. He didn’t like having that heretic’s tome so close to his heart, but it was the safest place to carry it and he’d be rid of the damned thing soon enough. He took a last drag on his lho-stick and stubbed it out. It was time to get moving.

‘I saw him again, father,’ Mina said.

Jonah turned, surprised by the tremor in his twin sister’s voice. He’d given up correcting her about his identity long ago. It only confused her. Besides, he’d been more of a parent to her than their real father ever had. They’d both been diligent disciples of the old tyrant’s zealotry, even after they’d learnt he wasn’t a real priest, but Mina – solemn, softly radiant Mina – had always been Senior Transcriptor Malachi Tythe’s favoured child.

_He named her after a saint_, Jonah recalled. _Mina of the Bloody Rose_...

In the gloom his sister looked more like a ghost than a saint, her eyes dark smudges in the long, pale blur of her face. Like many of the hive’s survivors, she had slipped into an ambivalent half-life that dislocated her from sense and insanity alike. Her lank hair had turned ash white, drained of colour along with her soul. Though time had turned slippery since the Fall she couldn’t be much past twenty, yet a stranger might have mistaken her for a crone.

But not Jonah.

To him Mina’s grace was inviolate. Under the grime and dissolution he still recognised the sister who had shielded him from their father’s violence whenever he’d misquoted a psalm or stumbled over a catechism. Later, when he was older, she had stopped him from striking back, somehow always finding a way to rein in his rage. Without her he would have become a monster long before the monsters were everywhere.

_I’m doing this for her, father_, he thought fiercely. If the old man had lived past the beginning of the end he would have been appalled by the things his son had done to survive, but Jonah didn’t regret any of it. Truth to tell, the Fall had _freed_ him.

‘Who did you see, Mina?’ he asked gently.

‘The starving man.’ Her fingers were fiddling with the rosary beads dangling from her neck. Sometimes the coloured glass beads kept her content for hours, but not now. In fact Jonah couldn’t remember when he’d last seen her so agitated.

‘His face is always in shadow,’ Mina continued, ‘but I can see his eyes. Silver eyes. He’s closer now.’

_That dream again_. It was more vivid to her than their reality. Maybe that was a
mercy, but Jonah didn’t like it.

‘Silver is a mark of purity,’ he said, clasping her hands in his own to still them. They felt fragile and cold, like the bones of a small animal. ‘Perhaps you’ve dreamt of one of the God-Emperor’s holy warriors. Maybe even a Space Marine.’

He wasn’t sure he believed in the Imperium’s most fabled defenders, let alone that one might turn up on their backwater world in its hour of need, but Mina had always adored the parables about them.

‘A Space Marine?’ She frowned, turning the possibility over, her eyes suddenly bright. Deprivation had withered her body, but amplified the essential otherworldliness that had always been there. If she was a ghost, it was a holy one. ‘Do you really think so, father?’

‘Has to be.’ Jonah pulled away and her hands resumed their unconscious labours. ‘I have to go, Mina.’ He didn’t like leaving her like this, but there was no avoiding it. ‘Remember, don’t open the door for anybody.’ He smiled. ‘Except maybe your silver-eyed champion.’

_Such salves are for the innocent, the ignorant and—_ Jonah cut the phrase off angrily. He’d only skim-read the first page of the heretic’s tome he was carrying yet the words had latched on to his thoughts like leeches. He could almost recite them verbatim. The years he’d wasted following in his father’s footsteps, vacantly transcribing holy texts in the Ecclesiarchy Conservatorium, had attuned him to memorising drivel. He could reel off as much scripture as any priest – and with more counterfeit conviction than most! – but this was different. These words felt alive.

_Hungry._

_They’ll fade when I’m rid of the book_, he told himself.

‘Jonah,’ Mina called as he threw the last of the door bolts. Startled to hear his name on her lips, he glanced round. She had pressed her face up against the window, as if she could see past its iron shutter. ‘I don’t think he’s a Space Marine, brother.’

_She woke up_, Jonah mused as he crept through the murky, rubble-strewn streets of the city. As always, he kept to the shadows, but never the deepest ones where predators might wait.

_Just for a moment, she knew me_. He stowed the thought. Now wasn’t the time. He had to stay focused. Hive Carceri was dying, even if it wouldn’t admit it yet, but that only made it more dangerous. High above, lights still shone in the vast
dome that enclosed the metropolis, but their radiance had dimmed year-on-year, receding to a listless grey that recast the sprawl of wilting tenements and silent manufactoria in perpetual twilight. Jonah doubted even that would last much longer. Beyond the dome there was only darkness and the darkness wanted in.

_We’ll be gone by then_, he vowed, as he always did when he risked a shadow-run through the streets. A trickle of ships still passed through Carceri’s militia-run space port. Most were traders looking to bleed the desperate dry, but he’d heard some offered passage off-world for the right price. Whatever it was, Jonah would pay it. The book he’d stolen from the Conservatorium vaults would go a long way towards that…

_You’ll find no joy and precious little glory… at journey’s end_, it cautioned.

‘More than we’ll find here,’ Jonah murmured as he entered a plaza littered with abandoned transports. He had attended a riotous festival here once – an event his father most definitely wouldn’t have approved of. There had been a girl back then. Throne alone knew what had happened to her. Or what she looked like. He couldn’t even remember her name now, though he’d searched frantically for her in the wake of the Fall. That had been before he woke up to the Night’s game and realised such things were relics of another life. Hanging on to them was a loser’s play.

_You’ve seen and sacrificed too much_, the book agreed.

Jonah crossed the square in the cover of a tram that had become a mass tomb. Through the dust-speckled windows he saw the passengers sitting stiffly, frozen on a road to nowhere with terminal shock etched into their faces. They hadn’t had time for terror. Like everyone who’d died in the first instant of perfect darkness they were desiccated, yet free of decay, as if the trauma that killed them had also expunged the natural processes of death. Tens of thousands had died that way, from underhive scum to nobles in their palatial towers, all struck down in the arrhythmic heartbeat when True Night fell upon their world. Senior Transcriptor Tythe had been among them, snuffed out as he pored over a scroll, while the faithless son working opposite him was passed over.

_The Sacred Damned…_

The name for the first wave of the dead had been coined by the redemption cult that rose from the ashes of Carceri’s staid Imperial church. It made no sense to Jonah, but then nothing about the fanatics’ bitter creed did. Given half a chance the bastards would probably condemn his sister as a witch. Like his father they wouldn’t recognise true holiness if it wore a burning halo.

_Truth is a slippery beast_, the book cautioned. It felt cold against Jonah’s chest.
He imagined sly worms extruding from its binding, questing for flesh.

Throwing caution to the night, Jonah abandoned the cover of the wheeled tomb and sprinted across the plaza. There was a howl from somewhere behind him – long and doleful, the cry of a man whittled into something less. He hadn’t heard its like before and didn’t care to put a face on it now. Out here there was no end to nightmares if a man went looking for them.

He ducked into the shadows of the street opposite and kept on running, heedless of the risk – a sharp left at the next junction, then again two further along, then up the side of the old protein packing plant and along the roof – only a madman would go through that hellish place now…

As always, Jonah had planned his route meticulously using the maps he’d scavenged from a gutted Arbites station in the first days. That prize had cost him heavily, forcing him to make his first kill – a dying officer who’d fired on him as he rifled through the wreckage. It had taken several blows with an iron bar to put the armoured man down. Did that still count as a murder after the Fall?

_Only if you enjoyed it_, Jonah assured himself, as he did every time he took a life. Now it sounded like something the book might say.

‘They were all for her,’ he told the night, as if it cared.

Clambering down a pipe on the far side of the protein plant, Jonah dropped into a garbage-choked yard and scowled. The place was worse than he remembered, but he hadn’t been through here in a long time. The slobbering noises bubbling up from below as he’d crept across the roof had reminded him why. Whatever was growing down there in the nutri-vats was getting really big.

‘Never again,’ Jonah breathed, mentally crossing off this path.

As he climbed a mound of rubbish something thorny snatched at his ankle. He leapt without conscious thought, landing in a stumbling run on the far side. Pulling his gun free he spun round and fell into a low crouch, weapon levelled. The mound was shivering and sputtering like a long-dormant engine gunning itself into life. A swarm of knotted tendrils erupted from its mass, spilling garbage and black smoke. They mewled and shrieked as they whipped about, sounding like they were in pain.

_No_, Jonah realised as the smoke thinned – it wasn’t the mound screaming, but the big man caught at its summit. The captive was thrashing against the writhing tentacles and getting more tangled up as he fought to break free. A moment later Jonah caught sight of the man’s face and realised he wasn’t a man at all, at least he hadn’t been in a long time. Though the degenerate’s form was humanoid, its face had exploded into a cancerous whorl of tumours and snaggle-teeth that left
no room for eyes. The remnants of a manufactorum worker’s coveralls were still recognisable on its twisted frame. There were worse ways to fall to the Night than death.

‘You followed me,’ Jonah said, knowing it in his gut. The degenerate was the howling thing that had spotted him back at the square. It had been stalking him ever since. When he’d climbed the mound it must have been right behind him, probably only moments from striking.

‘Not tonight!’ Jonah taunted the fallen city. ‘Not here!’

He watched as his hunter was dragged down into the quaking mass, which was surely something that had leaked from the plant. With a final heave it was over and the mound fell silent. Jonah grinned, thrilled by his own luck. No, this was more than luck.

_Nothing is chance unless you allow it to be._

Had he read that in the book? He was certain he hadn’t, yet equally sure it would be in there somewhere. It _belonged_ there. Suddenly Jonah was eager to read the rest of it. He’d been paid half his finder’s fee upfront, but maybe the book was worth more than the balance he was due to collect tonight.

Jonah’s hand was already on the book when he remembered Mina and froze. Even in her confused state the heresies he was reaching for would horrify her. She might not understand the words, but she would feel their wrongness.

_But what if wrong is all that’s left?_ he argued. _Or all there ever was?_

No, that couldn’t be right – not in a world where pure souls like Mina’s still existed. He pulled his hand away from the book. If he was going to make his assignation he still had a fair way to go.

‘It’s for her,’ he repeated as he got moving. ‘All of it.’

But now the pledge tasted stale.

Jonah’s path carried him farther than he had ever ventured before, deep into the perimeter ghettos, where the curve of the dome was close and the hovels were stacked like the building blocks of an idiot child. Wilting under their own weight, the haphazard towers leant into each other, crushing the avenues below into a suffocating maze.

_Out here the city has been dying forever,_ Jonah thought. _Just waiting for the rest of us to catch up._

The stench in the narrow streets was appalling. Only the Sacred Damned had been exempt from putrefaction. The millions who’d died afterwards – in the rioting and the crackdowns by what was left of the authorities, then later to the
creeping attritions of disease and starvation – *they’d* all rotted faster than you could burn them. The whole hive reeked of death, but Jonah had never known anything like this. Here it was a heady, almost liquefied *presence*. And yet there was no sign of the corpses themselves.

‘Word is they get up sometimes,’ his watch-partner, Foree, had said. ‘Night makes ’em forget they died.’

Jonah didn’t believe it. He’d seen plenty of craziness, but dead was dead, even after the Fall. Break that and nothing made sense anymore.

‘Don’t think about it,’ he told himself, but words weren’t enough. *Not here.* He stopped and lit a lho-stick, keeping his hands cupped around the igniter. As a rule he steered clear of them on the streets, but Throne damn it, he needed one now, if only to fend off the stench. He took a long, blessed drag and pressed on.

From here on he only had his buyer’s directions to guide him, for the shrine he sought wasn’t on any map. The shark-eyed ganger who’d set up the deal had passed on the instructions along with Jonah’s first payment. They were inscribed on the back of a tattered municipal flyer in a handwritten script that was ripe with geometric flourishes. Despite himself, Jonah had been impressed; the disciplines of his old life hadn’t faded and he knew the work of a master calligrapher when he saw it. He could almost picture the mind behind those letters – fastidious, yet prone to excess in its eagerness to impose harmony upon the page.

*Or upon the world?*

Without fail the directions sent Jonah down the darkest, most winding paths, but they didn’t lie. He found the shrine at the end of an alley, crouched against the inner skin of the dome, safely out of sight and mind to anybody who wasn’t in the know. Accidental trespassers wouldn’t identify the squat rotunda as a place of worship, for it was featureless save for a pair of jagged slashes above the entrance, the right raised slightly above the left. It wasn’t a symbol any Throne-fearing hiver would recognise, but Jonah knew it instantly because its likeness was etched into the cover of the book he was carrying.

*Only truth cuts deep enough.*

The shrine’s heavy wooden door was open and light bled from within – a flickering indigo radiance that obscured rather than illuminated whatever it fell upon. Jonah hesitated, repelled by the prospect of its touch, but he’d already risked too much to write off this payment. No, that was a lie. It wasn’t about the pay anymore. It was about the book. He needed to be rid of it. If that didn’t happen now he feared it never would.
Jonah spat out his lho-stick and stepped inside. He saw nothing of the chamber beyond the threshold, for his eyes had no attention to spare it. Like doomed worlds captured by a collapsed star they were drawn to the impossible machine hovering in the air ahead.

‘Sacred Throne,’ he breathed, trying to fathom it. The contraption was rotating slowly, weaving streamers of indigo light from the darkness. Try as he might, Jonah couldn’t judge its distance or true size, but it appeared to be no more than three handspans in diameter. His instincts screamed that it was far away, yet he saw it with a sharpness that hurt, as if its presence diminished his own.

‘It’s too much,’ he whispered.

It was, yet that didn’t matter, for the machine was beautiful beyond anything Jonah had imagined in wakefulness or sleep. Its body was composed of nine concentric silver rings that gyrated about a long spindle of fluted crystal. Each ring followed a unique trajectory, undulating up and down as it rotated alongside its fellows so their combined form shifted ceaselessly between a spherical cage and a flattened disc.

And yet the rings were the least part of the machine’s intricacy, for constellations of tiny silver spheres and cubes whirled about them in orbits too devious to follow, hurtling between the slicing bars of the cage, but somehow never quite colliding. Their passage left iridescent contrails, each one blossoming until a fresh trail annihilated it in an indigo microburst. Even in obliteration the patterns lingered on behind Jonah’s eyes, like ghostly scars. That glittering forever-after image seemed pregnant with possibilities, every one of them essential, every one of them just out of reach.

And every one a lie.

A muted symphony of ticking and whirring accompanied the machine’s industry, like a clockwork storm raging over some ineffable horizon, its power dampened not by distance, but imagination.

Or ambition?

‘Magnificent, is it not?’ a voice whispered from the void. ‘And yet it is merely a simulacrum of the actual engine. A reflection, if you will.’

Numbly Jonah realised he wasn’t alone. A figure stood a few paces beyond the machine. Its black robes flowed into the indigo-stained darkness, but its face shone like a spectral skull. This was surely his client, though the term seemed banal in this impossible place. He tried to focus on the stranger, but his eyes refused to abandon the machine.
‘You’re the buyer?’ he said, rallying his thoughts.
‘A collector,’ the stranger replied, ‘and an architect.’
‘Did you build…?’ Jonah trailed off. To call the gyre of light a machine *out loud* felt blasphemous – dangerous even.

‘The Shadow Orrery?’ the collector offered. ‘I did not, but with time and application I shall apprehend its workings.’ He enunciated each word precisely, as if he were sculpting rather than speaking his thoughts. ‘Nothing exists without order, my friend, and where there is order there is always a methodology.’

With an effort of will that felt physical, Jonah tore his gaze away from the machine and looked directly at the man. He had the aspect of an elder scholar, with a high brow and a long mane of white hair, but his skin was stretched so taut it had strangled the muscles beneath. His eyes were vast and bulging, as though they had devoured so much they had outgrown their sockets – or as if they didn’t belong there at all. They flitted back and forth over the machine, reluctant to linger in one place or stray too far. An addict’s eyes…

*He never looks away from it,* Jonah guessed. *He’s afraid he’ll miss something.*

The light shifted, stripping away a layer of mundane reality. Now Jonah saw that the stranger’s eyelids had been sliced off and the skin around the sockets pinned back with fine sutures. Had the man performed the procedures on himself? Had the peril of blinking appalled him so much?

*Are we just another distraction to you? Did you call down the night to make us go away? Is that what your machine does?* Jonah knew the answers would be in the mechanical web, along with everything else he had ever wanted to know.

*What else?* The urge to find out – to *look* – was almost overpowering.

‘Even diminished, the infinite remains absolute,’ the stranger said, reverently.
‘Would you care to see the reality?’
‘No,’ Jonah answered, truthfully.
‘Yes,’ Jonah answered, truthfully.

There was a violent eruption in the web. He *felt* it – a soul-deep rending, as if some essential part of him had split in sympathy with the discharge. It left him feeling both more and less than the man he had been just a moment before, as though the detonation had halved him into two new wholes, each less substantial than the original.

*Which am I?* Jonah wondered, unsure what he was even asking.

‘That is often the way of it, my friend,’ the stranger observed, as if reading Jonah’s thoughts. He smiled, showing yellowed teeth engraved with sigils; they looked like twin rows of tiny scrimshaws. The light shifted again, revealing
another secret: its worshipper’s face crawled with delicate black tattoos that mimicked the web, but lacked its life. Even the veins in his ill-fitting eyes danced to its tune.

*They’re all over him,* Jonah sensed. *Outside and in, carved deeper than flesh and bone, but he can’t see them.*

There was another pulse of light. In its wake the stranger’s irises glittered cold silver.

*Silver eyes?* Jonah moaned as he remembered his sister’s parting words: ‘He’s closer now. I don’t think he’s a Space Marine, brother.’

*She was trying to warn me,* he realised. Shuddering, he screwed his eyes shut, desperate to block out the poisonous light. If he kept looking at that exquisitely mutilated face he might glimpse its thoughts – might even start *feeling* them…

‘I’ve brought your book,’ he said, scrabbling for a way out like a drowned man clutching at flaws in his fate.

‘The book is yours, Jonah Tythe.’

‘I don’t want it.’

‘Nevertheless, it is yours.’

‘You owe me!’ Keeping his eyes shut, Jonah raised his pistol.

‘And you will be paid your due,’ the stranger assured, ‘but I commissioned you to find the book.’

‘I have!’

‘You have only just begun.’

‘No…’ The denial was all Jonah had left. Blue light was crawling through his eyelids, drawing connections he didn’t want to make. What he wanted was to get out. To turn and run and keep on running until—

*The door won’t be there.* He knew it with absolute certainty.

‘An enlightened man can neither run nor hide,’ the stranger said, ‘for even if he blinds himself in the glare of a thousand suns the truth remains inviolate.’

*You’re wrong,* Jonah thought, unsure where the conviction came from. *The moment you look at it – really look – truth changes. Over and over again!*

‘Only to those without the vision to perceive its greater shape,’ the addict urged.

‘Only to those without the intellect to conceive its true meaning and the will to *reshape* it.’

*Their quest is a futile one,* the book mocked, lending its weight to Jonah’s conviction and kindling his old rage. *They have always been chasing their own tails.*

‘Nothing with form is unknowable, Jonah Tythe. And whatever—’
‘It’s a lie!’ Jonah snarled and fired blind, aiming for his tormentor’s voice. There was a crash of shattering glass and a flare of light, then black silence. He waited, expecting retribution.

‘I’m sorry, Mina,’ he whispered, making it a prayer.

When retribution didn’t come he opened his eyes to utter darkness. No… not quite. There was something – a pinpoint of white light… getting bigger… closer – coming fast!

*And their tails are barbed.*

‘Run!’ someone warned. By the time he recognised the voice it was too late.

Charged and changed by its unholy passage, Jonah’s bullet ricocheted out of the immaterium and struck him between the eyes in a burst of silver light.
First Gospel

EXODUS

‘Severance from the self and its many-splendoured delusions is the first and furthest step on the path to Becoming.’

– The Torn Prophet
The Gospels Illuminant
My revered canoness, it is with some reluctance that I begin this document, but several days have passed since my arrival on Vytarn and I can postpone my oath to you no longer. It is by your leave that I have made the voyage to this haunted, holy world, and by your decree that I must make an account of all that I find here. The first undertaking fills me with joy, for I have long yearned to return to the place of my birth, but I confess the second sits ill with me. To act as a spy, especially among those who opened my eyes to the God-Emperor’s glory and initiated me into our sacred sisterhood, feels like a betrayal. I owe more than my life to the Last Candle. Without its guiding light I would have been lost long before I learned to seek.

Under the circumstances I trust you will understand why I have shunned the convenience of an electro-stylus in favour of quill and parchment. To my mind these time-honoured tools cultivate a gravity of thought that less tactile instruments cannot match. Moreover they engender commitment – a sense that one is making a mark upon the world. If I am to write this account, then let it be both committed and lasting.

I shall begin with some observations about the Last Candle as I knew it in my youth, and as I believe I shall find it once again – a paragon of sanctity that has endured for over a thousand years. Though you and I have talked at length about my former sect, I feel honour-bound to set my views down as a matter of record.
As you well know, my lady, there have always been factions within the greater body of the Cult Imperialis whose traditions or interpretation of the Divine Truth have strained against orthodox scripture. Their deviations may be born of ignorance, arrogance or a sincere striving for enlightenment, but all are imperfect. Sometimes their flaws are harmless, yet we crush them without mercy. Sometimes they are born of malevolence and bred only for harm, yet we allow them to flourish. I have seen worlds where unspeakable cruelties are ennobled in the God-Emperor’s name – martyr festivals where the poor immolate themselves to atone for the sins of their rulers, or flagellation parades that revel in degradation, even ritualised children’s crusades that are little more than mass murder! Such barbarities debase His enduring sacrifice and our own honour, yet it is the Last Candle – a sect that sprang from our own blessed order – that has drawn the Convent Sanctorum’s suspicions!

Forgive me, I know it is not my place to interpret the line between tolerable heterodoxy and heresy, but wherever it lies I do not believe the Last Candle has crossed it, either in error or sin. During the decade that I served with its celebrants I found no cause to doubt their piety. If my old sect has a failing it is surely humility, but in the words of the blessed Saint Arabella, ‘A clever woman provokes envy, hence a wise one evades regard.’

I believe the Last Candle is both clever and wise, hence it has sought to serve the Imperium in solitude, devoting its talents to contemplation and healing rather than glorious crusades or proselytisation. It gazes inward upon the divine!

To understand the character of the Last Candle you must understand the world it has taken for its retreat, for the two are intertwined like faith and fire. Though I have been absent from Vytarn for over twenty years, its storm-wracked oceans and soaring granite isles have never left my heart. There is an empyreal vitality in the chill air – it is always cold here! – that sharpens the senses and exalts the spirit, spurring one to become the best that one can possibly be.

I do not doubt there is also darkness on this world. Indeed I occasionally felt its presence during my youth, like a phantom stain I could neither identify nor dismiss, but it is eclipsed by profound grace. None who have wandered among the seven temple-clad spires of the Koronatus Ring or gazed upon the cathedral-topped mountain that presides over them could doubt the integrity of their architects. Each spire extols one of the sevenfold Virtues Illuminant, while the colossus at their heart is a monument to mankind’s manifest destiny! It is my abiding hope that Vytarn will some day be recognised as a true shrine world of
our beloved Imperium. Can such a resplendent realm be anything but holy?

Once again, I ask that you forgive me for speaking so boldly, my lady. I write these words to the sound of thunder – distant yet, but drawing closer with every line – and I confess the prospect of the coming storm incites me to be forthright. There is little in life as electrifying as being at sea amidst one of Vytarn’s great tempests! Our vessel will be sorely tested by the coming maelstrom, as will we who have entrusted our souls to its integrity, yet I welcome the trial!

You are my superior, but you have also been my truest friend and my second candle in the night. Without your faith I would not have survived my third death and awakened into my fourth and finest life. I will discharge my duty of vigilance to the Convent Sanctorum without prejudice or hesitation. If the Last Candle does indeed harbour heresy, as our revered prioress fears, then rest assured that I shall find it. But I believe my former mentors shall prove not merely innocent, but exemplary in their purity. I pray that my betrayal of their trust will also serve as their exoneration.

As if to punctuate the last word, thunder rumbled overhead and the lumen globes hanging from the ceiling flickered, swinging on their chains as the cabin heaved in sympathy with the ocean’s turbulence. The writer slammed a hand onto her journal as it began to slide from her desk. Fortunately the desk itself, along with the other elaborately carved furniture in the cabin, was bolted to the floor. The Exodus Gulf was rife with storms and the ships that ploughed its waters were designed to anticipate such fury. Nevertheless, no crossing was without hazard, and a handful of vessels were lost every year.

‘Exodus will take its toll,’ Asenath Hyades said aloud, though she was alone. ‘May the wrath of His regard sever us from iniquity.’

It had always been thus. Passage to the Koronatus Ring, Vytarn’s hallowed archipelago, could never – must never – be taken for granted, hence the planet’s only space port was situated on the remote Rosetta Isle, forcing visitors to complete their journey by sea. The eleven-day voyage was a sacrament in its own right, demanding a brave heart and a strong stomach, but above all else it was a test of faith, for though the sect’s Absolution barques were solidly built and solemnly blessed it was only by the Emperor’s grace that they prevailed.

The ship’s bell chimed through the squall, summoning the crew’s Exodii monks to the chapel, where they would chant the Litany of Exodus over and over until the storm had been appeased… or taken its toll. The vessel-indentured monks were forbidden to speak except when performing the ritual, though it was said
the litany was never absent from their minds.

‘Unto the sea I cast myself, may He know my faith,’ Asenath intoned, finding the words as if she had spoken them only yesterday. ‘Unto the storm I castigate myself, may He feel my fire.’ She hesitated, though not because the final verse eluded her. ‘Unto the infinite I unveil myself, may He judge my sins.’

I pray mine do not condemn us, she reflected, though she didn’t think it likely. For all her failings, the God-Emperor wasn’t done with her yet. The dream that had compelled her to return to Vytarn was too vivid and recurring to be anything but a portent. She had a purpose here, even if she didn’t know what it was yet.

The room heaved again, and lightning flared at the portholes. For several heartbeats everything became a stuttering black and white negative of itself. Moments later a barrage of rain struck the vessel, battering the cabin’s outer wall.

Asenath realised she was smiling. It was good to be back home!

Ashamed of her excitement, she returned her attention to the journal. Her smile became a frown as she read her words over. Their tone was unseemly, the proliferation of exclamation marks particularly so. It was unlike her to be so unguarded – so volatile. The storm had certainly played a part in that, but the bigger part was Vytarn itself, especially the prospect of seeing the First Light again. The sacred flame had burned atop the archipelago’s great cathedral for over a thousand years, reputedly lit by the Torn Prophet.

‘Truth is our first and lasting light,’ Asenath recited. ‘Speak only as you see and seek to be, for all else is darkness.’

It was the opening verse of the sect’s gospel, and also the last, closing the great circle of its founder’s vision. Asenath had invoked it every night since her ordination into the Adepta Sororitas at the age of nine, even during the blood-soaked misery of her third life, but its meaning had never felt so clear.

My account is disquieting because it is honest, she decided.

Someone giggled, throaty and mocking.

Asenath swung round, her hand moving to the sculpted candle pinned above her heart as her eyes searched the cabin. The wavering light left shadows at its corners, but they were empty. She was alone save for the stylised Battle Sisters carved into the wood-panelled walls. The armoured warriors glared at her, their enamelled eyes filled with disapproval.

Suddenly Asenath was eager to be gone from here.

I have made a beginning, she decided, closing the book. Even if she were inclined to continue writing, it would be impossible while the cabin was rocking
about like a zealot in the grip of a fervour dream.

She offered a prayer to her quill and returned it to its case, placing that in turn into her medicae bag. The quill was a minor relic from her order’s vaults and she carried it everywhere. Its nib had been carved from the incisor tooth of a long-dead prelate renowned for his eloquence, but more importantly to Asenath, it had been a parting gift from her superior, Canoness Sanghata. The mistress of the Eternal Candle had known her troubled Sister would have need of it, just as she had recognised her friend’s need to make this journey, even if she hadn’t understood why.

*Would she have agreed if I’d told her the whole of it?*

Asenath put the question aside. There were more pressing matters to attend to. Her report was only one of the duties she had accepted as the price of her pilgrimage. The rest awaited her in the *Blood of Demeter*’s infirmary.

All fifty-one of them…

‘It’s no way for a Breacher to die,’ Feizt hissed, scowling at the rain-spattered porthole by his bunk. ‘Better the Razor had finished us than this groundrat’s death.’

There were mutters of agreement from the Guardsmen gathered around him in the makeshift infirmary. There were always Guardsmen gathered around Toland Feizt, even now, when so few remained alive. Over half the company’s survivors lay in their beds, unconscious or close to it, strapped down to stop them rolling out in the turbulence. Some of the walking wounded were hunched on their bunks, riding out the storm with prayers or meditation as their guts churned about in the tempest, but most had gravitated to their sergeant, clutching whatever handholds they could find as they listened to his latest invective against their fate. In their baggy, white convalescent coveralls they looked more like a band of angry phantoms than soldiers of the Astra Militarum.

‘If I’m going to drown, make it clean!’ Feizt railed. His voice had thinned to a fever-strained rasp, but its anger was undiminished. ‘Drown me in the honest void!’

Even among a company of big men the breach sergeant was a giant, just short of seven feet and sporting a top-heavy frame that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a gladiatorial servitor. All Void Breachers bulked out their bodies with vat-grown muscles and metabolic genhancements, but the process had gone awry in Feizt, twisting his form into a brutish parody of humanity. The accident would have left a lesser man an outcast or at best a prized regimental freak, but
Toland Feizt had used it to become a legend.

‘That storm’s hungry,’ he continued. ‘It wants to take us down, brothers.’ Nobody else in the company used the term brothers. Nobody else had the right.

They have always been his, Lemarché thought, watching the group from his bunk by the infirmary door. Even when Captain Froese commanded them, they belonged to Feizt. And they still do, though he is fading fast.

‘We’re not meant… to be here,’ Feizt was saying, forcing the words out between increasingly ragged breaths. His torso was naked save for a swathe of bandages around his midsection. ‘We’ve been had. Cast… down.’

His comrades met this with an uneasy silence.

‘Sister Asenath says there’s a hospital at the Ring,’ Specialist Schroyder offered tentatively. ‘The Last Candle’s healers will fix us up, breach sergeant.’

‘So they say, brother,’ Feizt replied darkly.

‘She wouldn’t lie, sergeant,’ Schroyder insisted.

‘She is Sororitas, yes,’ Breacher Zevraj added, as if that settled the matter.

‘No, she wouldn’t…’ Feizt turned from the porthole, his deep-set eyes glittering in his craggy face. ‘But what if they lied to her?’

‘Who, sergeant?’ Blast Breacher Hörka asked, frowning over his green-dyed beard. After Feizt, he was the biggest man in the company and a fierce fighter, but his talents didn’t extend to more abstract matters. Like thinking.

‘Don’t know,’ Feizt wheezed. ‘But who sticks a hospital in the middle of an ocean… days from the nearest space port?’ He shook his head. ‘It don’t… add up.’

Lemarché considered reprimanding him, but dismissed it. Feizt would be dead before they reached their destination and his ravings would die with him. It was a miracle he’d lasted this long – one Feizt owed as much to their guardian hospitaller as his own outrageous stamina – but he wouldn’t last much longer. There was nothing to gain from disciplining a dying man and perhaps much to lose.

He might even try to kill me for it, Lemarché mused dryly. They all might.

Exordio Void Breacher companies were composed entirely of veteran Guardsmen drawn from regular regiments of the Astra Militarum. They were more akin to the elites of the Tempestus Scions than the common soldiers Lemarché had overseen previously. As their name implied, they specialised in void-based actions – ship-to-ship boarding assaults or engagements in the vacuum of space, where up and down became mere abstractions and violence was wrought in near silence.
Blood-tight and void-sealed, the Breacher credo went. Spirit-locked to purge!

In the two years he had served with the men of Darkstar Company, Commissar Ichukwu Lemarché had experienced the strangest, most lethal battles of his long career. He had skirmished with aeldari raiders in the airless pits of a hollow moon as it disintegrated around them, and cleansed an infestation of arachnoid vermin from a warship’s hull, trusting his magnetised boots to keep him from falling into the abyss overhead. On one occasion the company had cut through the hull of a pirate cruiser’s bridge, slaughtering the crew without a shot being fired. Lemarché had been entranced when the bodies vented from the breach, writhing and haemorrhaging blood as they spun past him, each telling its own tale. They had been remarkable conflicts and Lemarché cherished every one, even the last, though it had cost him a leg and effectively killed the company.

The Razor...

Of the two hundred and fifty Breachers who had assaulted that crystalline meat grinder only seventy-seven had survived, and many of those had succumbed to their wounds within hours. The men crowded into this seaborne infirmary were the last of them.

Of us, Lemarché corrected himself, though he knew the Breachers would never see it that way. He had mastered their way of war and fought alongside them in a score of rarefied hells, yet he would always be an outsider.

It would have been the same in any regiment, of course, for how else could a commissar fulfil his duty as judge, jury and executioner over his charges? The men and women who wore the scarlet sash had to be outsiders. It was a sacrifice he had accepted without qualms until his assignment to Darkstar Company, where he had finally found warriors worthy of him – men he’d be proud to call equals. In return they hated him, not out of fear, but because his presence implied they were capable of it. He shamed them.

‘You look troubled, commissar. Does your wound still pain you?’

Covering his surprise with a smile, Lemarché turned to the woman standing beside his bunk. As always, her lightness of step impressed him. When had she entered the room?

‘My phantom will haunt me until a new leg puts it to rest, Sister,’ he answered, gesturing at the empty space below his left knee. ‘But I stopped paying attention long ago. It is the boot that went with it that aggrieves me. It was a fine boot.’

To his surprise she returned the smile. It was the first time he’d seen anything except a frown on that pale, serious face. Some men might be inclined to think it made her look younger, perhaps even attractive, but Lemarché felt it only
accentuated her severity. Sharpened it.

It wasn’t that Sister Asenath’s face was ugly – too long, too hard and marked by one too many scars for conventional beauty perhaps, but her high cheekbones and dark eyes were undeniably striking. No, it was simply that smiles didn’t belong there.

*And most especially not for me,* Lemarché added. He knew she despised him, though she was always studiously polite. Her kind often struggled to accept men of his calling.

‘The storm pleases you, Sister?’ he ventured.

Her smile vanished. ‘I merely welcome the God-Emperor’s judgement.’

‘This so-called Exodus?’ Lemarché asked with a nod.

‘You are familiar with the Rite of Crossing?’ She sounded surprised.

‘It is my duty to appraise myself of *all* the hazards my men face, Sister. Yes, I read the orientation tract before we landed.’

‘And what are your thoughts, commissar?’

‘It is a uniquely… *impractical* custom,’ he answered. ‘Especially when the travellers are gravely wounded.’

‘Visitors to the holy archipelago are not encouraged,’ Asenath said solemnly, ‘nor is its hospital intended for outsiders.’

‘Yet here we are, Sister.’

‘The Eternal Candle has petitioned your cause, commissar. Both your troops and their injuries are exceptional, hence an exception was made. You are truly blessed.’

‘Indeed, Sister,’ he agreed. ‘Moreover, I was born on a world with equally *irregular* customs.’ Lemarché indicated the ritual scars etched into his cheeks. He had received them when he turned six and proved himself a warrior. ‘I am not one to judge such things.’

‘An open-minded commissar?’ *A hint of mockery in her voice, perhaps?*

‘Not at all, merely focused. My jurisdiction lies elsewhere.’ He smiled again, but this time it was the broad, mirthless grin he bestowed upon wayward troopers when he was about to perform his gravest duty – not because he enjoyed the executions, but so the sinners would go to their final judgement fully aware of their absurdity. ‘And you, Sister? What do you make of our hosts?’

‘Their hospitallers are highly skilled,’ Asenath replied. ‘I am certain the Sisters of the Bronze Candle shall furnish you with a fine augmetic to address your injury.’

*That isn’t what I asked, Sister.*
‘All these *candles* they have,’ Lemarché said lightly. ‘Silver and bronze and iron, yet they always talk of the *last* one. And then there is the *eternal* candle of your own order.’ He indicated the sigil embroidered on Asenath’s white tunic. ‘I confess I cannot untangle one from the other.’

‘All are aspects of the same vessel, for all bear the God-Emperor’s divine fire.’

‘But our hosts are not part of your order?’ he pressed.

‘The Last Candle was lit from the flame of the Eternal, but it casts its own light.’ Asenath bowed her head. ‘If you will excuse me, commissar, I must attend to the others.’

_You are not what you seem, Sister_, Lemarché mused as she crossed to the bed opposite. He had seen it months ago – within the first moments of meeting her in fact. She and her fellow hospitallers had been waiting on the _Asclepius_ when the remnants of Darkstar Company had come on board, mangled by their encounter with the Razor. During their voyage through the void Asenath had proved to be the most skilled and compassionate of their nurses, though she had always cloaked her kindness in severity. By the time the _Asclepius_ reached its destination the Breachers had come to see her as part of the company. A few even called her Sister Darkstar, though never to her face.

_They love you_, Lemarché thought, watching the troopers’ faces light up as Asenath made her rounds. She glided through the shuddering room with the lightness of a spirit, stopping beside each wounded man to give what comfort she could.

_They love you and they are right to, but they do not really see you, Asenath Hyades._

Their adopted guardian might be walking the path of a healer now, but her bearing and scars spoke of other, harsher roads once travelled. Under that prim white tunic and wimple, Lemarché saw a warrior. That wasn’t unusual in itself, for the women of the Adepta Sororitas moved between the various branches of their organisation as duty demanded, but there was a *secrecy* about their nurse that troubled him. He saw it behind her every word and gesture, like a shadow trail he couldn’t quite follow, but nothing had disturbed him quite like the storm-born smile she’d let slip tonight. He hadn’t recognised the look immediately, but it had come to him while they talked. It wasn’t the smile of a healer or a fighter.

It was an executioner’s smile.

‘Want to die… on my feet,’ Feizt told the impossible woman who had just berated him.
‘You will only die if you choose to, sergeant,’ she replied levelly. ‘I have warned you against making unnecessary movements.’
‘Had to… see it.’ Feizt jerked his head at the porthole. ‘The storm.’ His comrades had slunk away when she’d chided him for being out of his bunk. He didn’t blame them. Nobody could argue with Sister Darkstar.
‘I have kept you alive, sergeant,’ she said. ‘Have I wasted my time? Have I wasted the Emperor’s Charity?’
‘I’m done… Sister.’ Every breath felt like a lungful of broken glass. ‘Seen it… in their eyes.’
‘Do you see it in mine?’
‘Don’t… follow you.’ He was swaying about woozily and the world was swaying with him – no, against him, pulling in too many directions at once.
*It’s going to come apart,* Feizt realised. *Any moment now…*
Sister Darkstar stepped closer. ‘Do you see your death in my eyes, breach sergeant?’
‘I…’ In the gloom all he saw under her white wimple were twin black pools. There was nothing in them. How could there be? They would swallow anything that came too close. She was the Void Angel, wasn’t she? Feizt shook his head violently, trying to rattle his thoughts into some kind of order.
*Shouldn’t be here,* he remembered. *None of us should be here.* It was the only thing he was sure of anymore, but when he tried to tell her – warn her – the words wouldn’t come.
‘The xenos shards in your chest can be removed,’ she was saying. ‘The Bronze Candle can heal you, but you must keep fighting.’
*Never… stopped!*
She placed a hand on his bandaged torso. Her touch was like ice, but her eyes were alive now, alight with compassion. That hurt more than the splinters tearing his guts open. It took a moment to realise why. Her pity shamed him.
‘Look to the Emperor’s Light and take strength,’ she urged. Then her expression hardened again, becoming a mocking smirk. ‘Are you a coward, Toland Feizt? Too weak to live? Or will you *endure*?’
‘Always… have,’ he choked out as his legs gave way.

II

The storm was still raging when Asenath finally left the infirmary. Many hours had passed since its onset, yet she sensed it was nowhere near its zenith. This
was going to be a hard crossing.
With a sigh she leant against the corridor wall and let herself sink to the floor, sitting with her back to the wall and her knees drawn up. It was undignified, but she was exhausted, physically and spiritually, by the façade of perfection her patients’ worshipful eyes demanded. She hadn’t allowed herself a single slip or stumble as she made her rounds, either in her stride or her serenity—

_The truth, Sister!_ The harsh thought came unbidden, but undeniable. _Your dissembling deceives nobody, least of all yourself._

Asenath closed her eyes, remembering the inexplicable smile she had offered Lemarché – _that snake of all people!_ – and then the way her patience had almost snapped with Feizt. The sergeant was reputedly a hero and she didn’t doubt his strength, but his stubbornness was exasperating. Lemarché had often hinted it might be better for the company if its informal commander passed into the Emperor’s care _sooner_ rather than later, which only made Asenath more determined to keep him alive, but by the Sacred Flame, Feizt wasn’t making it easy for her! She had saved him yet again, though she scarcely knew how, or for how much longer. When she had changed his bandages the gashes beneath had been livid and leaking pus. The Breacher assisting her had gagged at the stench as Asenath cleaned the wounds, but she hadn’t flinched.

_No, you cursed! Most vividly and profanely!_
And then there was the moan she had uttered when she found Glicke. The trooper had been lying flat on his back, his pillow soaked in the blood leaking from his ears. It was still warm to the touch, meaning he had expired recently, though nobody had heard him die. Perhaps it had been painless…

_More evasion! You saw his face. Maybe it was a quick death, but oh, there was pain!_
‘Exodus will take its toll,’ Asenath murmured, seeking her earlier conviction, but the phrase rang hollow now, outweighed by Konrad Glicke’s glassy stare. In her heart she knew the Rite of Crossing had nothing to do with his death. Like the six Breachers who had perished en route to Vytarn, he was dead because of the xenos taint in his body. Razorblight, the chirurgeons of the _Asclepius_ had called it.

_A fine name for a killer!_
‘A foul name,’ Asenath corrected herself.
All the survivors of Darkstar Company had been left scarred by their last, ill-fated mission, but it had proven difficult to gauge the _lethality_ of their injuries. Some had lost limbs, while others had been sliced open with almost surgical
precision. The lesions were always stained black with frostbite and laced with a silvery filigree of tiny crystals. The chirurgeons had treated the wounds as best they could, but removing the splinters had surpassed their abilities. Every attempt had caused the shards to shatter, dispersing the affliction further and hastening death. In a few cases, such as the commissar’s, the injuries were localised enough to amputate the blighted flesh completely, but most of the men were beyond help.

_Beyond hope_!

‘No, never that,’ Asenath denied.

Had chance delivered these men into the care of more dogmatic healers their fate would have been sealed, for the one thing the Astra Militarum was never short of was troops. Even the best were expendable, never mind those who were probably broken beyond repair, but the Eternal Candle was a rarity within the Imperium, even among other organisations of its kind. Compassion was at the heart of its mission.

‘It is often claimed there is only war, Sister,’ Canoness Sanghata had said to Asenath when she welcomed her into the order. ‘Our calling is to prove otherwise, even if we are but a solitary light in the darkness.’ Those words had marked the beginning of Asenath Hyades’ fourth life.

_The beginning of a lie_!

‘Of my true redemption.’

Yet almost two decades as a healer hadn’t mended the wounds in her soul, nor salved the nightmares they bled.

_Are you being tested, do you think?_

‘I am certain of it,’ Asenath decided, opening her eyes. ‘This storm is only the outward face of Exodus.’

She forced herself to her feet, but hesitated, unsure where to go. The prospect of returning to her cabin dismayed her. She couldn’t stop thinking about Konrad Glicke. He had been a shy man, never one to brag about his prowess in battle like most of the others. Indeed, there had been a rare gentleness about him. He was among the best of them.

_Among the weakest, else he’d still be alive_!

How many more would die before she could relinquish this burden of care? It had been her suggestion to entrust the wounded to her former sect, for the healing craft of the Last Candle was without parallel, even eclipsing that of its parent order, but she hadn’t planned on becoming their guardian spirit. These broken men were not her purpose here.
But we are only ever crutches or drudges or sweet angels of mercy to their kind, Sister!

‘I have been called to something higher,’ Asenath told herself fiercely. *Aye, there are other kinds of angels to walk among – darker, bloodier, brighter angels to aspire to!*

Confused by her bitterness, Asenath tried to pray, but the words wouldn’t come. She needed a point of focus – something tangible to lock on to. The ship’s chapel perhaps? Yes, she would join the monks in their ritual. It would be a pious way to meet her Exodus.

Commissar Lemarché drew the blanket back over Trooper Glicke’s face. The corpse would have to remain in the infirmary for tonight. Moving it with dignity would be difficult during the storm, especially since Glicke’s bunk was at the rear of the infirmary. The Breachers had accepted the death with their customary stoicism, but none save Reiss had seen the tortured look on the dead man’s face.

‘Sister Asenath believes it best that we keep the particulars of our comrade’s passing to ourselves, Lieutenant Reiss,’ Lemarché said quietly to the officer beside him. ‘I am in agreement.’

‘Yes, commissar,’ Reiss replied, but he looked doubtful.

‘You disagree, lieutenant?’

‘I don’t much like it, sir,’ Reiss admitted, running a hand through his crew-cut blond hair. His hand was missing two fingers, yet he was among the fortunate few; none of his wounds were deep, so he was free of the blight. ‘Breachers stand or fall together. We don’t keep secrets. Blood-tight, sir.’

‘An admirable sentiment, but imprudent on this occasion,’ Lemarché said as he secured the blanket’s straps. ‘As you are aware, morale is strained. And given Sergeant Feitz’s worsening condition—’

‘The breach sergeant will pull through. He always…’ Reiss trailed off, realising his impertinence. ‘My apologies, commissar.’

‘Continue, lieutenant.’

‘The man is like a Space Marine, sir. He can’t be killed.’

*He is nothing like a Space Marine,* Lemarché thought wearily. *And every man can be killed, even Space Marines.* The alternative struck him as vaguely distasteful.

‘Preacher Murnau used to say the sergeant was Throne-blessed.’ The reverence on Reiss’ square-jawed, blandly handsome face was vexing, especially since he was Feitz’s superior. ‘Every time something puts him down, he gets up stronger.
Says scrapping with death has made them brothers, sir.’
‘There is nothing so sour as the bad blood between brothers,’ Lemarché observed, quoting the memoirs of Lord Commissar Artemiev. ‘Nor a feud so bitter and soaked in shame.’

Reiss met this with a blank look. Lemarché sighed. Despite their skill in battle his charges were simple men. Subtlety was wasted on them – as was debate.
‘You will say nothing about the manner of Breacher Glicke’s death.’ He turned his coldest smile on Reiss. ‘Is that understood, lieutenant?’
‘Yes, commissar.’ Said with obedience, but without fear. Lemarché would have expected nothing less from Darkstar Company’s only surviving lieutenant. Reiss was precisely the kind of leader the Breachers needed now – staunch, disciplined and admirably predictable. He just needed to be free of Feizt’s shadow.
‘Inform the troops they are not to disturb Glicke’s body,’ Lemarché said, picking up his eagle-headed walking cane. ‘They can pay their respects later.’

After the cadaver has been disposed of... ‘Make it a matter of health. Tell them Sister Asenath has decreed it.’
‘Understood, sir.’

Lemarché turned away and began the tortuous hobble back to his bunk, keeping his back straight despite the turbulence. Even for this brief duty he had donned his high-peaked cap and black greatcoat over his hospital clothes. It was essential to maintain appearances, but the crude prosthetic limb strapped to his left knee undermined his dignity, clattering with every step he took and dragging behind.

What killed you, Glicke? Lemarché mused. Razorblight never ended in a good death, but the expression frozen onto Konrad Glicke’s face had been something new, born of terror as much as pain. Perhaps Feizt’s ravings weren’t entirely without substance. There was something uncanny about this ocean, particularly since the advent of the storm.

Lemarché stopped by the breach sergeant’s bed. Sister Asenath had arranged for its extension to support the man’s bulk, but Feizt’s feet still hung over the end. His chest rose and fell fitfully as he slept.
‘You have served your Emperor faithfully, Toland Feizt,’ Lemarché whispered. The giant moaned, as if he’d heard the words, but Lemarché knew that wasn’t possible. There was nothing supernal or blessed about Feizt, no matter how much his comrades wanted to believe it, but they wouldn’t accept that until he was gone. ‘Your service is over. Be at peace, brother.’

Lemarché respected the man’s ability, but outlandish notions swarmed about
him like treason to an open mind. And then there was the matter of his erratic
conduct on the Razor, as if he’d been... lost.

No, Feizt had become too unpredictable to countenance. Once the sergeant was
dead Reiss would exert his authority and order would be restored to the
company.

*Even if the company is little more than a platoon now, Lemarché admitted, and
a diminishing one at that...*

Asenath hurried along the heaving corridor, clutching the handrails for support.
The *Blood of Demeter* was a massive vessel encompassing seven sprawling
decks, but she had quickly learned to navigate its narrow corridors and spiral
stairways. Only the bridge and engine deck were off limits, along with the
quarters assigned to fellow travellers, and there weren’t many of those.

A squad of Battle Sisters had boarded alongside her party at Rosetta, their
ornate grey power armour and specialist weapons identifying them as Celestians,
the elites of the Iron Candle. One of the five had been as tall as a Breacher and
almost as broad. While the others had gone bareheaded, the towering woman had
never removed her backswepet castitas helm or stowed her meltagun. The
Celestians had kept to their quarters and Asenath had decided against
approaching them, sure she would find no camaraderie there.

The only other traveller she had seen at the port was a tall man clad in the
rough-spun grey cassock of an itinerant preacher. He had been hooded, but she
could imagine the face under the cowl. It would be a ferocious visage, shaven-
headed and sporting a bristling beard, the features scrunched into a perpetual
scowl of censure, the eyes piercing and alert for sin. The Ecclesiarchy cultivated
many such faces, and rightly so, but there was no call for them on this holy
world and she had no desire to see another in the flesh.

‘I am tired of them,’’ she admitted.

She could hear the sonorous chant of the Exodii now. The chapel must be just
ahead. Asenath added her voice to the litany and her sombre mood sloughed
away. Around the next corner the corridor ended in a pair of brass doors carved
with the rampant waves of Exodus. An attendant in a high-collared robe stood
before them, his headdress fashioned into a ship with a wooden candle for its
mast. His round face was powdered chalk-white, his lips rouged with cobalt and
pierced with a score of rings. As she approached, Asenath saw the golden
bangles were sewn together, effectively sealing the man’s mouth. The custom
was unfamiliar and faintly distasteful to her, but she had been away for two
decades. Some changes were inevitable.

She offered the attendant the sign of the Candlelit Aquila and he mirrored it with a sinuous flourish, his long, black-lacquered nails clacking when they met. ‘I would join the Exodii in their devotions,’ Asenath said formally.

He bowed his head and opened the doors, revealing a large heptagonal chamber with an altar at its centre. Touching her sigil, Asenath entered and drank in the holy space, impressed by its splendour. Each wall was draped in a silk tapestry depicting one of the Seven Virtues embodied as a saint. The doorway was incorporated into Veritas, the foremost of the Incarnates, represented by the sundered, sexless figure of the Torn Prophet.

‘Truth is our first and lasting light,’ Asenath whispered to the abstraction of the sect’s founder. It was more tormented than the images she was familiar with, its spiritual rendering accompanied by a kaleidoscopic splatter of viscera as its robed form was sundered. Inside the darkness of its still-intact cowl, the founder’s single eye glared, swollen and bloodshot with concentration. She didn’t like the rendition at all, but there was no denying its impact.

Revelation through excruciation!

Irrespective of their individual traits, all the Incarnates carried a stylised candle, its flame wreathed in a halo of expanding circles. Hidden backlights shone through each of the woven candles, lending them the illusion of life and washing the chamber in soft light.

Asenath’s gaze swept to Clementia, the virtue of mercy that her own order venerated. As always, it was manifested in the Bleeding Angel, a slim woman in the white tunic and wimple of a Sister Hospitaller, but this was unlike any depiction she had seen before. The saint’s candle was raised in both hands like an offering, its six concentric haloes dividing her face into segments that looked like they might come apart if she made a sudden movement. Blood dripped from the candle into her cupped palms and spilled over to pool around her bare feet. The surgical instruments of her craft hung from her belt like a butcher’s tools and a wet loop of intestinal coils dangled from her medicae bag. Her lips wore a benign smile that her wide, screaming eyes belied.

Mercy is twinned with malice, for one succours the other, sister.

Nauseated by the thought as much as the image, Asenath decided against studying the other tapestries too closely. Evidently the artist who had furnished the Blood of Demeter was drawn to grotesquerie. Regrettably such impulses were not uncommon across the Imperium, but she was dismayed to find them at work on Vytarn.
She turned to the altar, where a single, plain candle burned. Seven figures knelt around it, their shaven heads bowed as they chanted. In contrast to their garish attendant, the Exodii monks wore simple loincloths and collars of black iron. Chains snaked from their manacled throats to hooks along the altar’s rim, binding the monks to their worship. Their naked bodies were emaciated, yet as Asenath drew closer she sensed a wiry strength about them, as though they had passed the point of starvation and attained some deeper vigour.

Once again, this was something new. The Exodii had always observed strict fasting, but never to such extremes. Moreover, these celebrants bore the telltale scars of self-flagellation, a custom her current order decried, both on grounds of health and faith. And then there was the stench of unwashed flesh wafting from them… Mingled with the incense pervading the chamber it was somehow worse than the reek of Feizt’s wounds. Asenath gagged reflexively and the monks looked up, moving as one.

Their eyelids were sewn shut.

*The only sight they are allowed is the candle’s faint light. It shines through their fastened flesh like a dying sun. An artful contrivance, is it not?* The mirth that accompanied this insight repelled Asenath more than the mutilations themselves, which only encouraged the spiteful train of thought – *Oh come, you didn’t do this to them, dear Sister!*

The monks swung their heads about sightlessly, seeking the source of the disturbance, though they never faltered in their litany. Asenath backed away, quashing the urge to apologise for her intrusion, certain it would only agitate them further.

*They will soon forget you. Their souls are too shrunken to care for anything but their penance.*

As she retreated, Asenath caught sight of the Bleeding Angel again and froze. The woman in the tapestry was looking right at her, her lips twisted into a fanged grin. A serpentine tongue curled from her mouth and her skin was covered with delicate scales. Yet, hideous as these aberrations were, they were the least disturbing of the changes, for the face was hers.

Something clutched at Asenath’s robe. She glanced down and saw one of the monks had followed her, stretching his chain to the limit. With a hiss of revulsion, she stumbled backwards, breaking free of his grip, but he kept groping blindly at the empty air, his lips still mouthing their penance. Unwillingly Asenath’s gaze flicked back to the tapestry. The Bleeding Angel had reverted to her previous incarnation.
Don’t always believe what you see, Sister; her sly inner voice advised. Trust what you know!

The attendant showed no disapproval as Asenath left the chapel and retreated along the corridor. Though she was eager to escape the vile place she kept her pace dignified until she turned a corner.

‘How?’ she asked herself as she quickened her step. The sightless wretches in the chapel were symptoms of the Imperial Creed at its most debased and cruel. They symbolised everything the Eternal Candle had taught her to reject – everything the Last Candle had once also rejected. How had her former sect fallen so far so quickly?

Perhaps not so far, nor so quickly...

In hindsight, there had been warning signs at Rosetta. The ancient harbour town had been a shadow of the vibrant place she remembered, its elegant buildings poorly maintained and its citizens furtive. Squads of Battle Sisters in the slate-grey armour of the Iron Candle had stood watch at the twin ports of space and sea, their faces hidden behind jutting visors. The sect’s militant order numbered less than a thousand Sisters so Asenath had been surprised by their heavy presence at Rosetta. The warriors’ place had always been at the Ring, standing watch over the holy flame.

The sullen priest overseeing their passage had brushed off her questions with vague talk about discontent among the port folk. Discontent? There had never been discontent on the Candleworld! From the humblest ocean harvester to the Canoness Illuminant herself, all Vytarni were baptised into the Last Candle at birth and united in its light until death.

Blinded by its light!

‘I didn’t want to see the shadows,’ Asenath admitted. She turned a corner and stopped, staring down the corridor in surprise. The chapel and its gaudy sentinel lay ahead.

Waiting for you?

With an unbecoming grunt Asenath turned and retraced her steps, irritated by her error. The corridors were poorly lit and panelled with dark wood, which made them gloomier still, but she knew their layout. Doubtless her mind had been wandering.

‘Compose yourself, Sister,’ she chided herself.

Mercifully the storm had calmed and she was able to pick up her pace. As she walked, her thoughts returned to the scene in the chapel. She had seen such barbarities often during her service to the Convent Sanctorum, but what could
have brought about such a diametric change here? And how deep did it run? Could there be some substance to the Convent’s suspicions about her old sect? Might the–

Her stride faltered. She could hear the familiar chanting up ahead. Reluctantly she turned the corner. The attendant’s vacant gaze awaited her, and beyond it the open doors of the chapel.

Asenath cursed, more from confusion than anger and swung round, this time concentrating on every turn she took, but within minutes she was facing the chapel once again. She froze, one hand going to the symbol pinned to her tunic, the other to the quill case in her satchel, seeking the comforts of faith and friendship.

*Is this your test, do you suppose?*

‘It must be,’ Asenath agreed, backing away.

Praying aloud, she retreated yet again. The corridors looked identical, unbroken by anything save the brass-ringed portholes on the outward-facing walls and the elegant lumen globes dotting the ceiling. For the first time she noticed the absence of any doors along her path. Along *any* path she took. And where was the stairway she had descended to this deck?

*Is it hiding... or did something take it away?*

As Asenath passed another porthole something snagged her attention and she doubled back to peer outside. Her breath caught as she absorbed the scene beyond the dirty glass. Lightning was meandering through the dark sky like paint dripping down a canvas, its lazy-bright light illuminating a horizon of slowly creeping waves. Something rumbled past overhead, sending vibrations through the floor. It took Asenath several seconds to recognise the distended sound as thunder.

*If the storm runs down to stillness you’ll be frozen in its eye forever.*

‘Never,’ Asenath swore. As she spoke her breath frosted the glass with ice and she realised the temperature was dropping, slipping rapidly from cool to cold to freezing. Shivering, she backed away from the stagnating vista and pressed on until she heard the chanting once more.

‘No.’ She turned back, determined to deny the inevitable, but after a couple of corridors it was waiting around the corner again.

And again…

And again…

*And forever-after, dear Sister!*

With a chill that eclipsed the cold, Asenath realised the distance to the chapel
was diminishing with her every attempt at escape, as if space and time were contracting around her – *shepherding* her towards her fate. The Bleeding Angel would be waiting there, unbound from her tapestry and incarnated in harrowed flesh. She would be only too eager to share her secrets with a fellow sister of mercy.

‘I won’t go back!’ Asenath shouted, defying more than just the chapel.

Then you must break out!

She swept round the next corner then leapt back swiftly, trying to outflank the trap. A spiral staircase beckoned where there had been an empty corridor only a moment before. With a cry of triumph, Asenath leapt for it, grabbing the bannister as she bounded up the steps two at a time and surged into the stairwell above. If she could reach the next level maybe she would be free…

You think it’s so easy?

The next level never came. The stairs went on and on, corkscrewing up through a circular shaft of interlocking brass panels and vertical lumen strips. She imagined the steps uncurling somewhere up ahead, slotting into place like the parts of some clockwork contraption, always just out of sight, but matching her desperate charge step for step. Ignoring her aching muscles, she rushed on, trying to catch the elusive point of generation…

You can’t outrun yourself, Sister! And if you hide, you’re already there.

Soon she had climbed beyond the possible limits of the ship, further even than the heights of its sensor-encrusted watchtower, yet there was still no end in sight.

Nor will there ever be!

Shuddering, Asenath fell to her knees, her wracked lungs burning as she fought for breath in the frigid air. The shaft creaked and swayed around her like a tree in a gale. Was it still growing despite her surrender? She imagined it extending in both directions simultaneously, assembling an infinite abyss above and below.

As within, so without…

‘My Emperor, enlighten me… in my darkness,’ Asenath gasped. Her hands trembling, she pulled the quill case from her satchel and kissed it. ‘Unveil the flame… of Your will.’ Her numb fingers fumbled at the latch, her voice gathering strength as the prayer took hold in her heart. ‘By Your light I shall walk without taint. By Your will I shall wield the Sword of Justice. By Your mercy—’

She broke into a despairing moan as the case flipped open and she saw the blasphemy inside.

*The only lasting light is the one you kindle yourself, little Sister.*
The blessed quill was covered in blood. 

*The light that burns black within!*

Her world went out.

*In their spineless mediocrity, the Imperium’s grey regents condemn us to a wasted land where ignorance is crowned a virtue and rapture is damned as immortal sin. With empty words and enfeebling icons of piety they bind us to the banal, tugging our chains as we scrabble about in the rubble of our forsaken dreams for scraps of delight. To live by their laws is to die a lie within a lie! Break the chains that bind! Wreak and reign free as you will and wish to be!*

**III**

With a shriek of fury Asenath surged out of the darkness into a maelstrom of wind and rain. High above, vast bells swung back and forth like pendulums, spilling golden light as they chimed. The Censer Bells! She was on the ship’s upper deck, hurtling towards the edge at breakneck speed. Frantically she tried to halt her charge, but her feet skidded on the slick floor and she spun into the railings ahead. In the same moment the ship lurched, tumbling her upper body over the barrier towards the waves far below.

‘Come then!’ she yelled, exhilarated by her own terror.

Just before she slipped past the point of no return, something grabbed her tunic and hauled her back onto the deck. With a snarl she tore free and spun round, instinctively dropping into a fighting stance to face her rescuer. A hooded figure in a grey robe stood a few paces away, its legs braced for balance. Hazily she recognised the warrior priest who had boarded at Rosetta.

‘Peace, Sister!’ he shouted over the wind, raising his hands. ‘If you were answering the Emperor’s call I’ll not stand in your way again!’

Without another word he turned and walked away, heading for the cover of the stairwell, then stopped under the metal awning. Her breath coming in harsh gasps, Asenath watched as he produced a lho-stick and began to smoke. Had he been there when she’d burst onto the deck like a madwoman? He must have been…

*What did you see, preacher?*

She shivered as her adrenaline-charged fury drained away. The rain had already drenched her to the skin and her weariness had returned with a vengeance, but that was the least of her concerns. Questions swirled about her like a second
storm. How had she found her way up here? Or escaped the trap? What–

Not now! Don’t think! Just leave while you still can.

Seemingly lost in thought, the priest paid no attention as Asenath approached the stairwell. She was tempted to slip past him without a word, but that would have been unforgivable under the circumstances.

‘My thanks, preacher,’ she said solemnly. ‘I believe I owe you my life.’

‘I am merely a hand of the God-Emperor, Sister. It is by His mercy that you live.’ There was a pause as smoke curled from beneath his hood. ‘But you are most welcome.’

‘I sought the open air to pray,’ Asenath said, ‘but alas my diligence did not encompass my own steps.’ It sounded unlikely even to her, yet he didn’t dispute it. ‘I am fortunate that our paths crossed,’ she added.

‘Nothing is chance, Sister.’

‘True enough, sir.’ Asenath turned towards the stairs then hesitated. No, she wasn’t ready to attempt them yet. What if the trap snapped shut again when she set foot on the first step? What if there was no way out this time?

Go now, before he questions you!

‘What brings you to Vytarn, preacher?’ she asked on impulse.

The priest was silent for some time, seemingly considering his answer. ‘A book,’ he said finally.

‘Then you are embarked on research? You have chosen well. The Perihelion’s librarium is unrivalled in this sector.’ To her surprise she wanted to talk.

You want to confess, fool!

‘So I have heard,’ he replied.

‘The Last Candle has dedicated itself to the contemplation of the God-Emperor’s blessed word for over a thousand years,’ she continued. ‘Reverence through reflection, reflection through elucidation.’

‘The Gospels Illuminant?’ The priest turned to regard her, though his face remained hidden. ‘You know this planet well, Sister?’

Deny it!

‘The Candleworld is my spiritual cradle,’ she said. ‘I was ordained into the Adepta Sororitas here.’

‘Among the hospitallers of the Bronze Candle?’

‘I served with them for a time, but the greater balance of my service was with the Battle Sisters of the Iron.’

‘Then you are a warrior?’

‘No longer.’ She indicated her humble healer’s garb. ‘It has been many years
since I wielded a weapon.’
‘You still have the look about you,’ he observed. ‘It lingers in the eyes, Sister.’
‘You have me at a disadvantage there, sir.’
‘Forgive me, I have been discourteous,’ he said, pushing back his hood. His face was nothing like she had imagined. Instead of the customary beard and baldpate of his kind he was clean-shaven and his hair was bound into a short ponytail with a leather cord. Though it was completely white and there were wrinkles around his eyes Asenath struggled to guess his age. His complexion was ashen, almost anaemic, yet there was a weather-beaten vitality about his lean features that spoke of strength rather than sickness.

_Or perhaps strength through sickness_, Asenath gauged, recognising the haunted look in his grey eyes. For a moment she thought there was a third eye lodged between them, but it was only a circular scar, so pale it looked silver in the storm light.

‘It is an old wound,’ he said, noticing her attention. ‘I used to keep it covered, but I learnt better.’
‘We bear our true wounds within,’ she observed. ‘If we hide them they fester.’
‘Indeed… Sister…?’ he replied, turning the acknowledgement into a question. _Say nothing! Names have power._
‘Asenath,’ she answered.
‘You are a wise woman, Sister Asenath.’
‘Merely old.’
‘Not so old, I’d venture.’ He smiled, showing a hint of lho-stained teeth. ‘Besides, one begets the other – the years give with one hand and take away with two.’
‘You make it sound like a poor trade, priest.’
‘Just an inevitable one.’ His manner was becoming notably less formal the longer they spoke. ‘And no, it’s not a bad trade. Wisdom surpasses strength of arms in the war we wage.’
‘Hearts and minds are best conquered with words,’ she agreed. It was Canoness Sanghata’s favourite aphorism.
‘Oh, wisdom cuts much deeper than mere words, Sister!’
‘That depends on the words,’ Asenath said solemnly. ‘Not all are equal.’
‘No, they are not.’ He was silent for a moment, then he indicated the sigil on her tunic. ‘You are not with the Last Candle anymore?’
‘I have been gone from Vytarn for over twenty years. Truthfully I feel like a stranger here.’ It felt good to say it aloud.
‘Perhaps that’s for the best, Sister. This is a strange place.’
‘But a holy one,’ Asenath added.  
*Do you still believe that?*
‘Maybe so,’ he said. ‘You look tired, Sister Asenath.’
‘The Rite of Crossing has been trying,’ she admitted.
‘Yes, it’s quite a storm.’ He looked up at the convulsing sky. ‘But I’ve always liked storms. That’s why I came up here.’
Asenath remembered her own excitement at the tempest’s onset. That seemed like a lifetime ago now.  
*Are you so sure it wasn’t?*
No, she wasn’t sure of *anything* at the moment. She could barely stand, never mind think straight. She needed sleep, no matter what awaited her on the stairs or in her dreams.
‘I trust we shall meet again, preacher,’ Asenath said. He didn’t reply so she entered the stairwell, then turned. ‘You didn’t give me your name.’
‘Did I not?’ he replied distantly. ‘It’s Jonah, Sister. Jonah Tythe.’
Chapter Two
TEMPERANCE

I

The Testimony of Asenath Hyades – Second Statement

I have resolved not to read these accounts over lest the temptation to reconsider, rephrase or redact their content compromises their veracity. They must stand as they are written in the moment, unabridged by excessive reflection. I shall strive for sobriety in my observations, but it must be honest, not some engineered, craven forbearance. Anything else would be a betrayal of the commission you have set me, but also of myself, for I have come to believe that this testimony must also serve as my confession. Sweet damnation! For good or ill, my fate is entwined with the Candleworld and its custodians. If they are tainted then I fear I cannot escape the stain, though I shall strive to cleanse it.

Doubtless you will wonder at the change in my disposition since my opening statement. The chronolog on my desk indicates less than twelve hours separate that first, hope-filled entry from this one, yet they are divided by a far greater gulf, for the Rite of Crossing cannot be measured in mere days endured or leagues traversed. Its dimensions are decreed by the dreams of those who venture upon its ineffable tides and no two travellers ever make quite the same voyage.

For most, the crossing threatens no more than an unquiet stomach and a surfeit of troubled dreams, but for a few the phantasms take flight and find form, becoming manifest traducers of the soul. It is both a blessing and a curse to face them, for there can be no truer test of faith than gazing into a mirror darkly, nor
a greater peril should one be found wanting. It is the Sea of Souls writ small, with only the armour of one’s own purity to ward against corruption.

This night I looked deep into the mirror of my soul. I shall write of the things I saw *myself unveiled* when I have found the strength to dwell upon them and decipher their import. For now I can only say that Exodus has taken its toll, yet I know not what price I paid or whether I myself was found wanting **more**. So much more!

Asenath set her quill aside, paying no heed as it slid from the desk. It was just a mundane instrument, one of many spares she had brought with her on the journey. The relic Canoness Sanghata had gifted her was gone, lost when she blacked out in the warp-twisted stairwell, though in truth it had been lost before that, irredeemably tainted by its desecration.

‘Perhaps the blood I saw was just a phantasm,’ Asenath whispered, unable to decide whether that would make the relic’s loss better or worse. Had the entire experience been illusory? Did that make a difference... or was it the whole point? And what–

*Rest now, Sister.*

Yes, that was a fine idea. After her encounter with the priest she had returned to her cabin like a sleepwalker, but the need to record her nightmare had been too strong to ignore. Some things needed to be done without equivocation. Her eyes strayed to the open page…

*No.*

Asenath closed the journal. No, she would keep her vow and allow the words to stand without amendment. If they condemned her then so be it. She rose shakily and crossed to her bed. Somewhere a bell was tolling, so deep and distant it might have been an echo from another world. She wondered whether Breacher Gliche was waiting for her there.

Toland Feizt woke to the clanging of a bell. It sounded as hollow as the promise of glory he had given his brothers when their drop-ship set out for the Razor.

*Shouldn’t be here,* he tried to say, but his throat wouldn’t obey. His eyelids did, but opening them felt like pressing his own weight. Blurrily he stared at the cracked white expanse they revealed. What was it? He felt the answer was obvious, but *obvious* seemed very far away right now, along with everything else he’d once taken for granted.

*Am I dead? Is this all there is... after?*

A black mote buzzed into view. There was nothing else to see so he followed it
as it zigzagged about like a tiny ornithopter, adjusting its course every time the bell tolled. Finally it spiralled down towards him and settled on the tip of his nose. With an effort he managed to bring it into focus.

It was a fly, fat and bristling with sharp hairs.

Feizt snarled with revulsion and swatted it away. No… No, that was only how it happened in his head. His body wasn’t up to either of those things anymore, though he kept trying anyway because that was who he was – who he’d always been, no matter what They did to him or how many times They told him he was finished.

*Endure*, Sister Darkstar had commanded, as if he’d ever done anything else.

The fly watched him struggle, its bulbous eyes inscrutable. They were like twin orbs of interwoven crystals, each facet glittering with foetid green light. Feizt saw his own slack face reflected back at him inside every cell. He knew it was impossible to see anything so small, but he saw it anyway.

*Seven sides*, he counted. *Every cell has seven sides. And the bug has seven legs.* That wasn’t right, was it?

The fly swivelled its head like a machine and began to rub its thorny forelegs together. He could *hear* the scrape of their friction. That was impossible too, but what did that matter anymore?

*What do you want?* Feizt imagined he said.

It didn’t reply of course, not even with another twist of its head. How could it? It was just a fly. *Nothing.* But for nothing it was making one hell of a void-blown racket, like broken nails raking sheet metal, up and down until his teeth were jangling with it. He could *smell* the sound – a sour-sweet charnel stench that spoke of swollen graves and withered hopes.

*Go away!*

To his surprise the insect stopped its hellish playing, but instead of taking flight it crawled out of sight down his nose. A moment later he felt it tickling at his nostrils, then along his upper lip.

*Looking for a way in…*

He tried to close his mouth, but like every other part of him its strings had been cut. His whole face felt like dead meat.

*Just ripe enough for the bastard’s eggs…*

The fly was inside his mouth now, crawling over his dry tongue towards his gullet. He could feel every step of its manifold legs, like pinpricks from a cluster of unclean needles. The taste made him want to gag, but his throat was past caring.
You have served your Emperor faithfully, Toland Feizt, he heard, or remembered hearing. Maybe he’d only heard it in a dream. His dreams were full of such talk.

Your service is over, the phantom decree continued. Be at peace.

The words were prettier than most of the farewells Feizt had been offered, but even so he’d heard their message a hundred times before, from the random violence of his youth in the Tetraktys Skyhives to the organised carnage of the Astra Militarum…

You’re raptor-meat, runt... Fly high or drop dead, wireboy... This rookie’s las-fodder, lads... Won’t last fifteen hours... Dead man walking... There is only a thirteen point one per cent probability that his heart will tolerate the strain of the metabolic misalignment he is experiencing...

He’s done!

‘No…’ The denial came out as a sigh that expelled the fly and sent tremors of bright pain through Feizt’s chest. He welcomed the agony, knowing it meant his body was still alive. Better yet, he was pulling its strings again. He clenched his fists, revelling in that simple, precious freedom. Then he remembered the fly.

Have to find it. Feizt didn’t know why that was so, only that it was important – maybe more important than life or death. Kill it.

He tried to rise, but it was like wading through a wall of onrushing water. Something unseen was pressing down on his chest, trying to crush the life right back out of him. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Feizt pushed back, putting more than muscle and bone into the fight.

Kill it!

Abruptly the resistance was gone and he jerked upright. Somehow darkness had fallen over the infirmary during his struggle. The lights were out and his comrades lay in their bunks, oblivious to the battle he was waging. A pensive stillness hung over the place, as though the world itself were hiding. The slap of the waves had fallen silent, along with the rain. Only the fly was moving. He could hear it whirring about somewhere overhead, taunting him to get on his feet and come after it.

Oh I will, you little shit.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, Feizt realised there was someone standing at the end of his bed. The figure had the height and build of a Breacher, but there was something wrong with its shape. He squinted, trying to make sense of it until a flash of lightning lit the room and froze, binding everything in colourless brilliance, including the intruder.
What in the void?

The stranger was draped from head to toe in a blanket, the restraint straps of its makeshift shroud hanging loosely on either side. It should have looked ridiculous, like the clumsy apparitions children had contrived from time immemorial to frighten each other, but right now, right here there was nothing funny about it all. In this storm-lit limbo it looked as serious as the Breath Stealer herself.

‘Who are you?’ Feizt rasped, keeping his eyes on the stranger as his hand went for the combat knife under his pillow. The Breachers were forbidden guns on the ship, but only the most gravely wounded had given up their blades.

‘I asked you a question,’ Feizt said, brandishing his dagger.

The figure made no reply. With a buzz the fly landed on its veiled face. Feizt sensed it watching him alongside its host, waiting for his next move.

‘Get up, brothers!’ he croaked to his sleeping comrades, then tried again, this time managing a broken yell, but none of them stirred. He realised none of them would. Even if he let loose with a Bruiser gun in the middle of the room they’d all just keep on dreaming. This was his fight alone.

Like all the ones that ever really counted...

Groaning, Feizt hauled himself to his feet. Spikes of pain flared in his guts as his wounds tore open again, but he ignored them. Sister Darkstar would be mad, but there was no helping it. As he stumbled towards the apparition the fly started up its grating, scraping fiddling again, mocking his weakness – daring him to look...

‘Frag you!’ Feizt snarled and yanked off the blanket.

II

The Blood of Demeter rode low in the roiling ocean, its blunt prow battering a path through the waves. The highest of them licked the upper deck, where Jonah Tythe stood motionless, gripping the railings where the hospitaller had almost plummeted to her death. He had been here since she left, brooding on her strange behaviour. Her story hadn’t added up – hadn’t even begun to explain her wild charge or the look on her face when he’d intervened. He had a nose for lies, and a tongue for telling them too. Those talents were born in the unnatural night that swallowed his home world, and the long years that followed had only sharpened them.

She was lying, but she wasn’t any good at it, Jonah mused, running over his
conversation with Asenath yet again. And she was scared.
‘What were you fleeing from, Sister?’ he asked aloud. He was pretty sure it hadn’t been death that troubled her. The Adepta Sororitas were selfless to a fault, only too eager to throw their lives away for Emperor and Imperium. Every one of them hankered after martyrdom, even their healers and scholars. They’re harder to break than Space Marines, the informal wisdom went, and Jonah was inclined to believe it.

He wasn’t sure why the hospitaller lingered in his thoughts. Maybe it was the mystery of her that nagged at him, or the possibility she might be useful on a world where he had no allies. Whatever the reason, Sister Asenath wasn’t quite like any of the Adepta Sororitas he’d ever met, and he’d met a fair few over the years, especially since adopting the guise of a priest.

‘She doesn’t have the armour,’ he decided. ‘Or it’s been cracked.’ He wasn’t thinking of steel or ceramite, but rather the truest shield of her kind: there were fractures in Asenath’s faith. Yes, that was what frightened her, and with good reason, because her peers would condemn such a failing without mercy, but in Jonah’s experience doubt could be an advantage. It all depended on the doubter’s backbone. Either way it was interesting.

‘I think I like her, Mina,’ he told his lost sister.

There was a flare of white light as the storm lashed a nearby lightning vane. Dazzled, Jonah blinked and saw silver…

And he remembers the incandescent bullet as it speeds towards him out of the void, and the glacial burn as it passes through skin and bone and enters the core of his being. He remembers the bewildering perception that its trajectory is perfectly equidistant to each of his eyes, and the certain knowledge that this is somehow terribly significant. Most vividly of all, he remembers the agony when the bullet blossoms inside his skull like a cold sun going nova, annihilating past, present and future in a single eternal instant.

And then there is darkness and Jonah remembers that he has no business remembering at all, because he should have nothing left to remember with.

‘I am nothing,’ he whispers.

And nothing is chance, the heretical tome he has been carrying forever replies.

With infinitesimal slowness the void relinquishes its hold on him. First Jonah feels the weight of the book against his chest… then the pounding of his heart… and the lifeblood coursing through his vessels. Against all reason he is still alive, but his body feels different somehow. Numb? No… distant is a better word for it.
Only the book has any real weight now, for its grip on him has deepened immeasurably.

‘You won’t hold me,’ he vows, directing the words at the silver-eyed bastard who lured him into this trap. ‘Not you, nor this dead city.’

He opens his eyes and sees he is back outside the cursed shrine. The twin gashes above its entrance have fractured into a multitude of meaningless cracks. Though its doorway is still open there is only darkness beyond the threshold now. Whatever power inhabited this place is gone, leaving only a shell, yet the stain of its touch endures. The prospect of entering again repels him, but perhaps he can find some clue to his enemy’s nature within. Besides, this trap has already been sprung.

Activating the torch affixed to his headband, Jonah enters. The circular chamber within is empty, its grey walls devoid of any decoration, but as he approaches the centre he hears a brittle crunching and looks down. The ground is littered with shards of broken glass. They glitter with myriad hues, like fragments of a petrified rainbow. Jonah remembers the shattering sound when he fired his gun in this place. Did he hit some kind of glassaic window?

He crouches and picks up a shard, wary of its jagged edges. It shimmers a rich cerulean blue as he examines it.

‘It was a mirror,’ Jonah murmurs as realisation hits him. A mirror onto another place, maybe even another time... The apprehension is stamped with the same inexplicable certainty that has haunted him throughout the entire night. How long has this trap been here? Has it always been waiting for him or would some other fool have served equally well?

He turns the fragment over and sees his sister staring back at him from behind the glass. Her eyes are wide with terror as she screams mutely.

‘Mina!’ Jonah yells and the shard shatters in his hand, spraying him with tiny splinters. He leaps to his feet and turns towards the doorway, then pauses to scoop up a handful of fragments, ignoring the cuts they make. He cannot say why he wants them, but later he will wish he had gathered more.

Then he is running. As he bursts from the shrine he sees a congregation of the hive’s slum-dwellers gathered outside. They are all dead and far from immaculate in their condition. Their faces have dissolved into morasses of mouldering flesh with jaws that yawn wide enough to touch their sunken chests. Where eyes once gazed upon the world there are now only gaping hollows wreathed in baleful green light.

They’ve been here all along, Jonah senses. I just couldn’t see them before.
He doesn’t break his charge. Against such numbers and with nowhere else to go momentum is his only meaningful weapon.

The dead moan as they scent him and reach out with strangely distended arms, their fingers tipped with tenebrous talons. Jonah answers their welcome with a bellow of rage and throws up an arm to ward his face as he barrels into the first of them. The creature bursts asunder in a swirl of filthy ectoplasm, as does the one behind it. They are as insubstantial as mist, their forms disintegrating from the slightest impact, yet their touch is still inimical, for as he hurtles through the mob he feels his vigour sloughing away, drained by every contact.

Somewhere beneath his fury, the cold, calculating part of Jonah’s mind understands that without the gift of the warped bullet he would already be dead. Then again, these creatures couldn’t even see him before. The gift has opened his eyes to horrors he previously only imagined, but in so doing made him a beacon to them. It is a sour bargain, but one that might give him an edge against the silver-eyed schemer who has set him up. Thinking of his tormentor stokes his rage afresh, lending him the strength to plunge through the last of the spectral vermin.

Reeling, he swings round and sees they are already reforming, but it seems they have lost interest in him. Their drowned voices conjoined in an inchoate chorus of misery, they shamble on towards the shrine. Instinctively Jonah understands they hate the place as much as he does.

‘Tear its heart out!’ he yells after them.

The ordeal has left him shivering and aching all over, as if he is caught in the grip of a fever. The desire to rest is almost irresistible, but then he remembers the terror on his sister’s face. With a savage curse he gets moving again.

‘I’m coming, Mina,’ Jonah promised, as his lightning-dazzled vision cleared.

Throwing back his hood, he turned his face up to the raging sky, welcoming the heavy rain, though he barely felt it. Like everything else that had touched his skin since that fateful – fatal? – night in the shrine, the raindrops felt dull, like memories of sensations long past. Sometimes he imagined the spectral bullet had killed his body and left his soul trapped in an insensate shell that somehow still walked, but that was just a fancy, for he knew his condition was no ailment of the flesh. Every one of the shadow-market medicae and biologis adepts he’d consulted over the years had confirmed there was nothing wrong with his body. His sensory dislocation was rooted somewhere deeper. With one exception the experts insisted the fault was in his brain, but Jonah knew the dissenting voice
had found the truth of it: ‘It’s a soul curse, Three-Eyes.’

A high-pitched chiming broke across Jonah’s thoughts. The eyes of the granite gargoyles lining the deck were pulsing red as their jaw klaxons sounded the alarum.

Someone was hammering on the cabin door, competing for attention with the chiming of the wall hailer. Together they were enough to drag the sleeper out of the limbo she had been wandering.

_Glicke wasn’t there_, Asenath thought as she awoke. _Nobody was there. Nobody human at least..._ All she remembered was a black road spiralling up through white nothingness and the dread certainty that she was being followed by something unspeakable. It was the same hollow nightmare that had haunted her sleep for over a year.

The knocking at the door intensified.

‘I hear you!’ Asenath called over the cacophony and rolled from her bunk, reaching for a weapon that was no longer there. She hadn’t carried one in years, but the preacher was right about her old instincts; some things lingered long after their time had passed. The alarum meant danger, and in her blood danger called for a weapon – not that it would do her much good, for the chiming likely signalled some nautical calamity. Perhaps the ship was going down...

She glanced at her chronolog. Barely two hours had elapsed since she had surrendered to sleep yet her thoughts were blissfully free of the febrile intensity that had plagued her since the storm hit. The ship was still careening in its grip, but Asenath was no longer caught in its eye.

_Is my Exodus over?_

She silenced the brass wall hailer with a thump to its cherubic face and opened the door. An armoured woman stood outside, one arm raised to knock again, the other cradling an ornate bolt rifle. The grey plates of her suit were trimmed with black iron and the symbol of the Last Candle was emblazoned on her breast-plate in stark white, indicating her purity. Her ash-blonde hair was styled in the traditional bob of a Battle Sister, framing the kind of face that adorned propaganda banners across the Imperium – handsome and radiantly pale, with steely blue eyes and full lips. It was both alluring and forbidding, a face that young women aspired to and young men longed to die for.

_But it has no scars_, Asenath noted. _There is no opportunity to earn them on the Candleworld._

‘You will come with me, hospitaller,’ the stranger said without preamble. ‘Your
service is required.’
‘Where are we going?’ Asenath asked, picking up her medicae bag. She was sorely aware of her dishevelled state beside the exquisite warrior, who was undoubtedly one of the Celestians she had seen at Rosetta. ‘The alarum–’
‘We cannot delay,’ the Battle Sister snapped, turning away. ‘Come!’
‘Is our vessel endangered?’ Asenath asked, following the stranger along the corridor. The alarum had fallen silent, but warning lights still pulsed red along the walls.
‘We face Exodus,’ the Celestian said pointedly. ‘Have you forgotten the Gospels Illuminant, Hospitaller Hyades?’
‘You know who I am?’
‘I do. You have chosen a poor time to return to the Candleworld, abnegator.’ *Abnegator?* The old accusation struck Asenath like icy water, its potency undiminished despite the years. It tasted of loss, shame and fellowship forfeited.
‘I am here on a mission of mercy,’ Asenath said. ‘The Sisters of the Bronze Candle have accepted my petition for aid. I am bound for the Sacrasta Vermillion.’
‘The Sacrasta is not a common hospital.’
‘Nor are my charges common soldiers,’ Asenath countered. ‘And their affliction is most *uncommon.*’
‘The Last Candle must see to its own, abnegator.’
‘I am no abnegator. I have never rejected the Gospels Illuminant, Sister.’
‘We are not Sisters.’
‘Then I owe you no fealty,’ Asenath said, swinging around. Before she could take a step an armoured hand fell upon her shoulder, holding her still.
‘My orders are clear,’ the Celestian warned. ‘You will come with me or I shall carry you, abnegator.’
‘I must see to my patients.’
‘Your companions are secure.’
‘Secure?’ Asenath asked doubtfully.
‘Do not try my patience. While you prattle on, a loyal servant of the God-Emperor lies dying. Will you forsake your present duty as you forsook the last?’

‘Step away,’ the Battle Sister standing outside the infirmary door commanded, levelling her bulky weapon.
‘I am a commissar of the Astra Militarum, Sister Indrik,’ Lemarché said calmly, ignoring the blackened nozzle of her meltagun. ‘You will afford me the proper
respect.’

‘With respect, step away from the doorway, commissar,’ the armoured woman replied. The voice reverberating through her sealed visor sounded decidedly unfeminine to Lemarché’s ears. Then again, there was nothing feminine about the warrior’s size either. She was well over a head taller than him, with a broad-shouldered frame that rivalled a Breacher’s. In her dark grey battleplate she looked more like a cast-iron statue than a human being. She had arrived shortly after the alarum sounded and made it clear nobody would be permitted to leave, but other than her name she had offered no explanation.

‘I have one man dead in here and another missing,’ Lemarché pressed. ‘Our security has been compromised, Sister. My troops need their weapons.’

‘Fear not, I will protect you,’ Sister Indrik said seriously. ‘Now step away.’

With a curt nod Lemarché obeyed, signalling the men crowded behind him to follow suit. Reluctantly the able-bodied Breachers retreated towards the far side of the infirmary, muttering as they circled around the blanket-covered corpse that lay opposite Feizt’s bed. As Lemarché hobbled towards the cadaver Lieutenant Reiss drew him aside.

‘We should move him, commissar,’ the officer urged in a low voice, indicating the corpse.

‘Not until Sister Asenath has made an examination. Emperor willing, she may shed some light on this atrocity. Besides, every man capable of walking has already seen the body, lieutenant.’

‘I’m not talking about hiding anything, sir. It’s not right to leave a fellow Breacher like that.’

‘It is the living I am most concerned with, lieutenant.’

And the living are beginning to fray, Lemarché reflected. The men of Darkstar Company weren’t afraid of any foe they could face with a gun or a blade, but the creeping, intangible killer infesting their flesh had gnawed their discipline down to the bone. Waking to an alarum and finding a mutilated corpse in their midst had not been conducive to good morale. While they slept somebody had dragged Glicke’s body across the infirmary and hacked it apart, somehow managing both feats without disturbing anyone.

And then there was the question of the breach sergeant. Feizt’s bunk had been empty and a search of the infirmary had confirmed he was gone. To the commissar’s chagrin, that had caused more consternation than Glicke’s corpse.

Feizt was the only thing holding them together; Lemarché admitted as he approached the huddled troops. He was their undying champion and a little of
his invulnerability touched them all.

This mess was precisely why Lemarché deplored heroes. They were an unstable element in a unit, too volatile to predict in the field and liable to inflict great damage when they fell. In his memoirs, the ever-perceptive Artemiev had dubbed them ‘magnificent time bombs of discord’.

And you have most assuredly detonated, Toland Feizt, Lemarché judged as he listened to the squabbling troopers.

‘Woman not stop us all,’ Hörka was arguing, his heavily accented voice filled with anger. ‘She only get one shot!’

‘That’s a void-damn melta you’re talking about, Ork!’ Santino mocked his fellow Blast Breacher. ‘One shot’ll burn through us all.’ The swarthy trooper shook his head emphatically, his dreadlocks whipping about in emphasis. ‘Even if it don’t, we got nothing to touch that gear she’s wearing. She’ll tear us apart.’

‘To talk of such things is blasphemous, yes,’ Zevraj protested. His shaven scalp was covered in a swirl of devotional tattoos that converged on a golden aquila stamped across his forehead. An Oberai Redeemer by background, he was the oldest and most pious man in the company, which had earned him the nickname deacon. Santino had meant it as a joke, but Zevraj had embraced it with absolute sobriety. ‘You will damn us, comrades,’ he added sternly.

Standing outside the bickering circle, Lemarché waited for Reiss to intervene, but the lieutenant just waited with him, as lost as the others.

This cannot stand, Lemarché decided, not at all. His fingers twitched, eager for a gun. Since joining Darkstar Company he had found no cause to execute a trooper and it would be wasteful now, yet he found himself drawn to the possibilities. Which of these men would he choose? Who would serve as the most compelling example to the others?

‘We will find way!’ Hörka growled. ‘I twist bitch’s head off with my hands if—’

His threat turned into a choked cry as Lemarché chopped him across the throat with his cane, holding back a fraction from a killing blow.

‘Did I hear you threaten a daughter of the Emperor?’ the commissar asked mildly as the hulking trooper clawed at his throat, his eyes bulging. Impressively, Hörka straightened his back and tried to answer, but was incapable of anything but a strangled croak. Lemarché cast his gaze across the others, lingering on each of them for a moment before settling on Reiss. If they were going to turn on him this would be the moment. He found the prospect peculiarly exhilarating.

‘Are your men a rabble, lieutenant?’

‘No, commissar!’
‘Then please ensure they do not mislead me again,’ Lemarché said, ‘because I cannot abide a rabble.’

‘Yes, commissar!’ Reiss hesitated only a moment before continuing: ‘We need to find the breach sergeant, sir.’ There were murmurs of assent from the others.

*Some steel at last, Reiss,* Lemarché noted approvingly. ‘We do and we will,’ he agreed, ‘but we are Astra Militarum and we shall proceed with honour. The Adepta Sororitas are our sworn allies.’

‘We need our guns, sir,’ Schroyder said cautiously. ‘Whatever messed up Glicke could come back.’

‘*Whoever,*’ Lemarché corrected, jabbing his cane at the trooper.

‘It was the sergeant,’ someone rasped behind him. ‘Saw him do it.’

Lemarché turned and saw Breacher Rynfeld had clambered from his bunk. The demolitions specialist was among the most gravely wounded of the men, his right arm sheared off at the shoulder, along with half his face. His skin was frosted with the silvery scales of terminal Razorblight and the iris of his surviving eye had lost most of its colour.

‘Return to your bunk, Breacher Rynfeld,’ Lemarché ordered.

‘He kept on stabbing,’ the dying man muttered, drool oozing from his cracked lips, ‘but Glicke wouldn’t go down. Just stood there and took it all… until the sergeant hacked his head right off.’

‘Sacred Throne ward us,’ Zevraj hissed, making the sign of the aquila.

‘It’s the flies,’ Rynfeld continued, his gaze flitting around the room, chasing something unseen. ‘They got into Glicke. They’re everywhere now.’

‘You are mistaken, trooper,’ Lemarché said, hobbling towards him. ‘There are no flies here.’

‘You got to burn what’s left,’ Rynfeld wheezed, pointing at the corpse. ‘Burn it… so it don’t come back again.’ He grabbed the commissar’s coat with his remaining hand, almost unbalancing him. ‘Got to be sure!’

‘That is quite enough, Breacher,’ Lemarché said, pulling free in disgust. The stench wafting off the trooper was appalling.

*This one is tainted beyond salvage,* Artemiev would have concluded.

Suddenly a fresh terror seized the dying man. ‘You… you’ve got to burn me too… when… I…’ Rynfeld’s eyes rolled in their sockets and he toppled over.

Lemarché made no attempt to catch him before he hit the floor. ‘Return Breacher Rynfeld to his bunk,’ he ordered the others. ‘Strap him down properly this time.’

As Lemarché brushed down his greatcoat something buzzed past his ear.
III

Asenath followed the elegant Celestian in silence. Though the alarum had ceased the emergency was evidently still in motion. As they descended through the decks men and women in the grey tunics of the ship’s Candlewards hurried past them, many armed with crossbows and short swords. Only the Adepta Sororitas were permitted more powerful weaponry on Vytarn, ensuring their superiority despite their numbers.

‘Did you come aboard to keep watch on us?’ she asked the Celestian.

‘You overestimate your importance, abnegator,’ the warrior replied frostily. ‘My squad has been recalled to the Perihelion. Our paths merely crossed by chance.’ Her tone made it clear that she would say no more on the matter.

_You are prideful, woman_, Asenath judged. _The Iron Candle has grown lax in its standards if such as you are found worthy of its Celestians._

Very few Battle Sisters could hope to achieve the perfect harmony of martial prowess and spiritual temperance that a Celestian embodied. Every order of the Adepta Sororitas had its own customs for identifying the truly exceptional, but there was no certain path to elevation. A warrior might spill the blood of a thousand heretics across a hundred battlefields, yet some ineffable, essential quality might still elude her. She might be a fine and faithful soldier, but she would never be a Celestian.

For the Sisters of the Iron Candle, who lacked wars to wage or material foes to overcome, the selection process was particularly esoteric, but no less rigorous. Or at least it had been in Asenath’s time. She was intimately familiar with the Ordeals Numinous, for she had once stood on the precipice of elevation to the hallowed inner circle herself. That was why her departure had been so keenly felt – and apparently bitterly remembered.

_I had no choice_, she thought, wanting to declare it to her haughty companion. _Father Deliverance requested my presence among his retinue. It would have been a sin to deny him._

But she couldn’t say the words aloud, for though they were true they weren’t the whole truth. She had _wanted_ to leave. What was a life of introspective vigil on the Candleworld beside the glories of the Arch Confessor’s prophecy-driven crusade to the Providence System?

Suddenly, as if she had opened some invisible door, the memories flooded back, annihilating the intervening years.

_And Asenath Hyades is twenty-two again. Though she doesn’t know it yet, today_
is the dawn of her second life.

She stands on the Prophet’s Causeway, her grey armour burnished and bedecked with ceremonial streamers, her bolter held rigidly across her breast-plate – a mirror image of the Battle Sisters to either side of her, and the six hundred more who line the winding mountain path in honour of their visitor.

The revered confessor has chosen a propitious day to make his ascent to the Candelabrum cathedral, for the planet’s perennial storms have fallen silent and the entire vista is alight with rare twinned sunlight, the joyful ochre of Salvation mingling with the angry russet of Damnation. The air is so clear that all seven of the Perihelion’s encircling mountains are visible, though they are many leagues distant. Asenath cannot recall ever having seen such a thing and she longs to turn full circle and savour the sight, but that would be an unforgivable breach of discipline. Besides, the God-Emperor has not granted this spectacle for her.

The only spire she can see from her position is Temperans, the Sternspire. It is the most solemn of the seven, where her order’s Celestians hold their trials for aspirant Sisters. The ordeals are devised to temper the spirit rather than the body, hardening it against temptations that would run rings around any mundane vice. Asenath has spent much time there recently so it is an auspicious sight. She doesn’t believe for a moment that mere chance has placed Temperans before her now. Her faith doesn’t allow for coincidences. There is order and meaning to everything.

Asenath’s heart soars as she hears the bombastic symphony of the cavalcade, but she resists the instinct to turn her head and watch it approach. She will see the visitors as they pass by, and in time she shall surely see Father Deliverance himself. His fleet has made a detour to the Candleworld before embarking upon its long voyage to the heathen Providence System. Remarkably his embassy has been granted dispensation to forgo Exodus and land at the Koronatus Ring itself. Such a breach of ritual is almost unheard of, which surely testifies to their visitor’s holiness. To gaze upon such a paragon of the Emperor’s Light will be a rare blessing.

Asenath reins in her eagerness and waits without further thought until the procession enters her line of sight.

The first to pass is a detachment of Battle Sisters representing the Order of the Thorn Eternal, which serves as the vanguard of the confessor’s crusade. Their white armour gleams in the sunlight, putting the dull grey of Asenath’s own to shame. The Celestians and Seraphim of their order sport black tabards and elaborate back banners emblazoned with a crimson flower entwined in thorns. A
white-haired woman in a sable cloak leads them, her backpack woven with a living rose bush that identifies her as a Canoness Excruciant. Her hatchet-like face is scrunched into a scowl of furious faith as she marches, her eyes roving suspiciously over the grey-armoured warriors of the Iron Candle. As the woman passes her, Asenath glimpses a human skull among the thorny vines of her backpack. Its sockets are filled with blood-red petals. Later she will learn that it belonged to its bearer’s predecessor.

After the Battle Sisters comes an Exorcist tank, its glittering chassis encrusted with the golden pipes of an ornate missile launcher. Today the only projectiles it fires are the resonant organ chords of an Imperial march. An ethereally beautiful woman in a silk robe sits on a cushion atop the tank playing a golden harp. Somehow the delicate notes she plucks are perfectly audible through the booming organ.

A band of white-robed monks follows the tank, each man swinging a smoking censer in flawless synchronicity with his fellows. Their tonsured heads are raised to the sky as they add their baritone chorus to the music. Winged cherubim flutter about them on mechanical wings, their chubby faces frozen in vacant smiles as they pound the tiny drums strapped to their bodies.

Asenath cannot restrain a gasp when she sees the armoured giants who march behind the monks. There are only three, yet they eclipse all that has gone before, for they are legends given substance. Of course she has never doubted the existence of the Adeptus Astartes, but to see them walking upon her world is a gift beyond compare, for they are surely the most quintessential of all the God-Emperor’s works. Their presence connects her to the deep past of her species and the destiny that its undying god has decreed, but beyond all that, they are simply beautiful.

Their armour shimmers and shifts colour restlessly, as though too energised to settle upon a single hue, yet there is always harmony between the three warriors. From her position she cannot see their left pauldrons, but those on the right are magnificent, each adorned with a unique and masterfully rendered painting. The warrior on the left plays host to a landscape of mighty fjords overlooked by a white fortress whose towers pierce the clouds. The one on the right bears the portrait of a woman whose beauty derives entirely from the mystery of her smile.

But it is the central giant whose artwork touches Asenath most profoundly. His composition is an abstract of geometric shapes that glimmer with delicate hues. Its superficial simplicity hints at a limitless subtlety that Asenath has never imagined before, but her spirit has always yearned for. The realisation changes
something in her irrevocably, though she cannot begin to say what.
She looks at the visage of the warrior who bears the revelation and sees his face is exactly as it should be – fine-featured and majestic, but without a trace of arrogance. His wide-set eyes are filled with wonder at the magnificence of the Perihelion, his lips curled into an ambiguous smile. A silver circlet binds his raven-black hair and a crimson cloak trails from his backpack, not quite touching the ground. From this moment on, whenever Asenath thinks of her Emperor she will see this transcendent warrior.
Unexpectedly, a fourth giant enters her field of view, striding several paces behind the others. Though his armour is equally ornate, its colour revolves around shades of blue, ranging through an inky indigo to a regal azure. Its back arches up into a plated cowl to frame his face so Asenath cannot see his hair, yet she is certain it will be white. Though he is as handsome as his comrades, there is a guarded, saturnine cast about him that speaks of one who has seen too much. His personal heraldry is a geometric sphere of intricate silver lines whose effect is almost holographic. While the leader’s abstract art thrilled her, this image repels her, though once again she cannot begin to say why.
And then the demigods have passed from sight and only a man remains, walking alone at the tail of the procession. Even if he were not following in the footsteps of giants he would be unremarkable. He wears a plain brown cassock cinched at the waist with a coil of rope and his bare feet are sandalled. The only artefact of faith he bears is the simple wooden aquila hanging from his neck. Though he sports the jutting beard and tonsure of a fully ordained preacher he is young, surely not much more than thirty-five. His skin is like burnished copper, his coal-black hair streaked with white to either side of his high, scholarly brow.
Asenath wonders who this nobody could be, but her thoughts rapidly turn to a more pressing matter: how has she missed Father Deliverance? Could he be somewhere further down the road? The urge to turn and look is almost overwhelming, but then she notices that the young preacher has halted in the road. He is looking directly at her, his amber eyes thoughtful. Her confusion deepens as he approaches.
‘Your realm is extraordinary, Sister,’ he says, stopping before her. ‘Signs and wonders throng this mountain like unwritten words awaiting an author. Wherever I look, I see the forms of things unknowable.’ He speaks with an unguarded sincerity, as though he is confiding in an old friend. ‘There is a quiet grace here that puts my procession to shame. Most worlds favour such spectacles, but here it is vulgar. I should have come alone.’
Noticing her confusion, he offers a wry smile and Asenath realises that he is quite beautiful. Had she not been overwhelmed by the glory of the transhuman warriors who preceded him she would have seen it immediately. In that moment she understands exactly who he is.

‘Forgive me,’ he says. ‘I’d wager you were expecting a grand old pontiff in fine robes and a bejewelled hat.’ His smile widens into an amused grin and it takes every shred of Asenath’s willpower not to return it. ‘I assure you, Sister, the Ecclesiarchy has a surfeit of such men – and women too – but I prefer to leave such displays to those who follow me, lest I forget myself.’ His expression clouds and he becomes deadly earnest. ‘Too many have lost themselves in themselves.’

‘The beggar’s crown is the hardest to wear,’ Asenath says on impulse, quoting from the Gospels Illuminant. ‘Humility is the finest of the Seven Virtues, for it is the most fragile.’

‘Clasp it too close and it will shatter like glass,’ he replies, grasping her meaning instantly. He looks past her, squinting at something in the distance. ‘One of your holy spires lies directly behind you, good Sister. Tell me, which is it?’

‘Vigilans,’ she says without looking. ‘The Watchspire.’

The man nods, as if he expected the answer. Then he looks at her again, his eyes alight with sincerity. ‘It is another sign,’ he says. ‘Like the one that drew me to you.’ He places a hand on her right shoulder. From any other man it would be an unforgivable transgression, but Asenath is no longer sure whether he is a mere man at all.

‘Will you serve as my Vigilant Paladin, Sister?’ Father Deliverance asks. ‘Will you come with me?’

‘I will not ask you again, abnegator,’ a cold voice said. ‘I will carry you if I must.’

Asenath stared at the armoured woman standing before her, trying to remember who she was. This place – this moment – felt insubstantial, like an approximation of reality. Then she recognised the wood-panelled corridor and remembered what lay around the next corner.

No! Sudden terror snapped her fully out of the past and she began to back away. ‘Well met, Sister Camille!’ someone called out behind her. Asenath swung round and saw another Celestian approaching with a white-haired preacher at her side.

‘Sister Marcilla,’ Asenath’s companion acknowledged the newcomer. ‘I see you
have found our wayward priest at last.’
‘You say that as though I were trying to hide,’ the man said, frowning.

_Jonah, Asenath recalled. His name is Jonah_. How could she have forgotten?
‘He was out in the storm,’ Sister Marcilla answered her fellow Celestian. Her face was a younger, softer reflection of Camille’s and they shared the same ash-blonde hair. The resemblance was too close for mere artifice, Asenath gauged. These women were _blood_ sisters. Vytarn’s population numbered less than a million souls so it wasn’t unknown for siblings to serve in the same order, but it stretched credibility that both would qualify as Celestians.

‘I will take them from here, Marcilla,’ the elder sibling said. ‘Stand watch on the bridge. It must not be compromised.’

‘Aye, Camille,’ Marcilla acknowledged. Her gaze drifted to Asenath, her expression more curious than hostile. Then she noticed her sister’s disapproving glare and hurried away.

‘Sister Asenath,’ Jonah said with a nod. ‘I did not expect to see you again quite so soon.’

‘Nor I you, priest,’ Asenath replied. ‘Do you know what this is about?’

‘No more than you, I suspect.’

‘Come!’ Sister Camille interjected, indicating that her charges should go ahead.

‘We have tarried too long already.’

_I have no choice_, Asenath decided. Oddly she found the priest’s presence here comforting. Perhaps he would prevent the trap from closing again.

Steeling herself, she turned the corner and faced the hateful chapel. Its brass doors were closed and guarded by a pair of burly Candlewards. The sanctum’s original guardian was slumped against the doorframe, a large candle jutting from the socket of his right eye. Perversely Asenath felt more relief than disgust at the sight, but this quickly turned to confusion as she drew closer.

The dead man was undoubtedly the attendant she had encountered earlier, yet also… _not_. In place of his extravagant robe he wore a plain habit, its front spattered with ichor from his ruined eye. There was no sign of his headdress, though a humble blue fez lay beside him. His features were unchanged, but his make-up was gone and his lips were neither sewn together nor pierced.

_How is this possible?_ Asenath thought, staring at the corpse.

‘A savage death, but a quick one,’ Jonah said gently, evidently mistaking the cause of her distress. ‘He didn’t suffer long, Sister.’

‘No, the suffering was reserved for those within,’ Sister Camille declared, opening the doors. ‘Be warned, it is a blasphemous sight.’
I don't want to see it, Asenath screamed silently, but her body disagreed. She willed herself to stillness, but her legs carried her forwards into the chapel. She tried to close her eyes, but they refused. I don't want to know! But when had that ever been an option for her?

The first thing she registered was the blood, because there was so very much of it. It was splashed across the walls and ceiling in raggedly geometric blotches and stripes, like an abstract painting rendered entirely in red. The ichor was pooled several inches deep across the floor, its surface mottled with dark clots and pale, fleshy coils. Along the walls hung the Exodii monks, their bodies tangled up in the shredded tapestries, one sacrificed to each virtue, their bellies slashed open to feed the carnage. The altar was free of blood, but a dagger protruded from its centre, buried halfway to the hilt where the sacred candle had once shone.

A Breacher combat knife, Asenath realised through her shock, recognising the weapon’s distinctive handle.

‘Over here, hospitaller!’ someone called from the far side of the chapel. Another Celestian stood beside one of the bodies, ankle-deep in viscera. The seven-branched candelabrum crowning her backpack identified her as the squad’s leader. ‘Quickly!’

Moving like a sleepwalker, Asenath obeyed, her boots squelching as she crossed the chamber.

‘This one still lives,’ the Celestian Superior said. Astonishingly, it was true. Despite his horrific wounds the shaven-headed man hanging from the wall was still breathing, though he was unconscious.

His eyes aren’t sewn up, Asenath noticed. And where are his chains? What–

‘Hospitaller!’ the leader snapped.

‘His injury is too grievous,’ Asenath said, shaking her head. ‘There is nothing I can do for him.’

‘I know a killing wound when I see one. I don’t expect you to save him.’

‘Then–’

‘Rouse him! I need to know what he saw.’

He shouldn’t have been able to see anything, Asenath thought, staring at the monk’s face. She had seen him earlier, but he was no longer one of the blind, half-starved degenerates she had fled from in disgust. Like the dead attendant outside, this was some alternate, untainted version of the same man.

‘Can you awaken him?’ the Celestian Superior pressed.

‘The pain would be excruciating.’
‘Nevertheless it must be done. This blasphemy cannot go unanswered, Sister.’

_Sister?_ Despite her brusqueness there was no animosity in the leader’s manner. For the first time, Asenath really looked at her. They were about the same age, though the Celestian’s black hair was free of the grey that streaked Asenath’s own. Her olive complexion and the epicanthic folds of her eyes spoke of a pure Ikiryu bloodline – a native Vytarni. Most of the planet’s indigenous people had perished in the great pestilence that ravaged it during the second decade of the prophet’s reign. Those few who survived were considered holy.

‘Yes, I am a Living Ghost,’ the woman said, noticing Asenath’s expression. ‘Will you help me, Sister?’

‘I will attempt it,’ Asenath replied, opening her bag. As she drew out a vial she spotted another anomaly – a woven face was staring at her over the dying man’s shoulder. It was unmistakably the Bleeding Angel of Mercy, but her eyes were now free of the madness Asenath had seen earlier. Presumably the portrait had altered in myriad other ways too, along with all the others here.

_What’s happening to me?_ Asenath wondered, her mind whirling. How far did these changes extend? Were they confined to the chapel precincts or had her entire world shifted?

‘Admant of heart,’ the Celestian Superior said expectantly.

‘Clear of purpose,’ Asenath answered, completing the credo of the Iron Candle, though the last thing she felt was clarity.

‘Find me some answers,’ the Celestian said, turning away.

_‘We need the truth from him,’_ Father Deliverance whispered without a voice, placing a hand on Asenath’s shoulder, as he always did when he asked the unthinkable of her. Though his touch no longer had any physical weight she could still _feel_ it. She always would. _‘Do whatever you must to root it out, my Vigilant Paladin.’_

Jonah was studying the defiled altar when the squad leader strode towards him, leaving Sister Asenath to her healing craft.

‘I am Celestian Superior Xhinoa Aokihara,’ she declared. ‘I have assumed command of this vessel.’

‘We are blessed to have your guidance in this dark time, revered Sister,’ Jonah replied, bowing his head.

‘What are your thoughts on this blasphemy, Brother Tythe?’

‘It is a vile sin against the God-Emperor,’ he answered carefully. ‘I didn’t summon you here to recite the obvious, priest.’
This is dangerous, Jonah thought, running over the possibilities. The disciples of the Last Candle couldn’t be trusted, not even its Celestians. His safest play was to stick to his cover story – he was a humble scholar visiting Vytarn to research the sect’s calligraphic techniques. Such a man would be lost in this crisis, with nothing to offer beyond outrage. On the other hand, the ship was still a long way from the Ring and he doubted the heretics behind this sacrilege – for it was surely more than one – had had their fill of carnage. He’d seen worse blasphemies, but not many.

Ruzhalka… The memory was rich with rage and the pungent odour of fish. Scattered bodies flashed before him, torn and frozen, yet somehow still reeking of blood. No, that wasn’t something he wanted to think about, especially not here, but there was a lesson in it. Could he risk keeping out of this?

‘I warned you he is merely a scribe, Celestian Superior,’ Camille said dismissively. She was standing in the doorway, apparently unwilling to sully her armoured boots in the blood.

‘Is that so, Brother Tythe?’ Xhinoa asked, studying him intently.

She already knows, Jonah judged. Not the truth of me, but enough of its shape to see through a blatant lie.

‘This was a ritual desecration,’ he proclaimed. ‘The bloodshed was just a conduit for the real wound inflicted here – a wound upon the world itself.’

‘I agree,’ she said. ‘Can the chapel be reconsecrated?’

‘The cut is too deep. Even if it could be staunched it would fester. There is nothing more unholy than holiness stained. That is why the Archenemy prizes such victories.’ Jonah made the sign of the aquila. ‘The altar stone must be sundered and the entire chamber cleansed with fire. Along with the bodies.’

‘But the chapel is the soul of the ship,’ Camille protested.

‘Then I advise you to scuttle the vessel when we reach the Ring,’ Jonah said sternly, his gaze fixed on the Celestian Superior. She was the only one who mattered here. ‘Or better yet, burn it. Anything else invites disaster.’

‘Once again I agree, priest,’ Xhinoa replied. ‘It will be done.’

She didn’t hesitate, Jonah noted. Her mind was already made up. She was testing me.

‘I am sorry, Celestian Superior,’ Asenath said, joining them. ‘I was unable to revive the monk. He has passed into the God-Emperor’s Light.’

‘That is unfortunate,’ Xhinoa replied, turning her searching gaze upon the hospitaller. ‘Doubtless you did your best, Sister.’

‘I recognise the knife,’ Asenath said, pointing at the dagger embedded in the
altar. ‘It is a Breacher blade.’
‘One of your unclean herd has been reported missing,’ Camille interjected. ‘It appears you have led a heretic to the Candleworld, abnegator.’
‘Or perhaps someone stole the knife?’ Jonah suggested, leaning over the altar to study the weapon. ‘The hilt is initialled. *K.G.* Does that mean anything to you, Sister Asenath?’ When she offered no reply he looked up and saw she had paled.
‘Hospitaller,’ Xhinoa prompted, ‘do you know the name?’
‘Konrad Gliche,’ Asenath said quietly. ‘A dead man’s name.’
Much has happened and my time is short so I shall keep these words brief, yet I dare not falter in this duty lest I lose the courage to continue. To denounce oneself is a sombre dispensation, but to denounce the world and wonders that have shaped one’s soul is a thousand times worse. I would gladly give my life in the God-Emperor’s service, but what if that service demands the death of a planet and its people? What if my testament brings down a decree of Exterminatus upon the Candleworld?

Let the little tyrants come try their luck!

The darkness here is more malign than I feared, and much stronger. A grievous blasphemy has been wrought upon this ship’s soul – the kind that stems from calculated heresy rather than blind folly. Someone or something – or more likely someone enslaved to something unholy – is at work upon this world, actively unravelling the ties that bind its people to sense and sanctity. I know not to what end, nor how widespread the corruption runs, but I believe there is still time to avert the coming catastrophe, for that is surely why I was compelled to return here. That must be His purpose for me!

And so my confession truly begins, for I am a shrivel-souled slave! it was not sentimentality that drew me back to my cradleworld, but a dream. It first came to me a little over a year ago and has not left me since. There was no discernible trigger to its advent, yet I have never doubted its import for it has a crystalline
lucidity that eclipses my waking life, as if dream and reality have become inverted.

The form it takes is constant and minimal. I walk an unwinding path of congealed darkness, ascending through a white vacuum so empty it can sustain neither sight nor sound. The ground feels like polished glass beneath my bare feet, ice-cold and treacherous, compelling me to tread with caution. The air is so lifeless it may not be there at all, yet its absence does not trouble my lungs.

I have been on this road forever and can envision no end to it, but I cannot – must not – pause even a moment, for I am not alone in this nothingness.

Something has been following me from the beginning that never was, mirroring my every step, but eager to close the gap. It is hungry beyond imagining and the one dreadful variable in this limbo is the distance between us. Should I falter my shadow will gain ground on me, yet no matter how assiduously I focus, the abyss eventually dulls my senses and I stumble on the road. Though I err only once or twice in each dream every mistake persists into the next night, swelling my lapses. And so, night by night, my stalker draws ever closer.

**Catch you if I can, catch me if you can’t!**

I know not what manner of entity pursues me, save that it is malevolent. Whenever I glance round the road is empty, yet I know something is there because I can feel its hunger like a fell radiance upon my back. It is real, it is coming for me and if it overtakes me I shall lose more than my life, for it is not mere flesh and blood that it craves.

**Such sweet puppets to ply and play upon, but oh so frail and fleeting…**

There is one hope in this creeping oblivion – a distant light on the path ahead. Like my stalker, it is something I sense rather than see, for it shines invisibly, but undeniably. The two phantoms are antithetical fates entwined – salvation and damnation vying for my eternal soul, and through that prize for something far greater.

**Does that make you the lock or the key, dear Sister?**

I know I must reach the light before my shadow claims me, but neither haste nor endurance will carry me any closer to that blessed beacon for it is not distance that divides us. Like the Rite of Crossing, the road to redemption lies within, where all true epiphanies reside. And in my heart I recognise the light as the sacred flame atop the Perihelion and understand that my salvation lies on the Candleworld.

‘It always has,’ Asenath whispered, ‘but I was too prideful to see it.’
She closed her journal, once again resisting the compulsion to read her words. Her path lay ahead. As in the dream, she had to keep moving forwards until she found an answer. For now her place was with her beleaguered charges in the infirmary. Somewhat to her surprise, Celestian Superior Xhinoa had granted her leave to go about her business freely. Unlike the prideful Camille, the Celestian commander had treated her with courtesy, if not quite respect.

‘Respect must be earned,’ Asenath chided herself. ‘I shall not disappoint her.’

After the horror in the chapel she had no desire to linger in her chamber, but it wasn’t just the journal that had drawn her here. She rose and crossed to the trunk beside her bed. Her fingers spun the wheels of its coded latch until it clicked free. Heaving the lid open, she rummaged beneath the neatly folded garments within until she found a gilded metal case. Her hands trembled as she drew it out.

‘I have no choice,’ she told herself.

Inside the case, nestled upon a bed of red velvet, lay a bolt pistol and a single ammo clip. The weapon’s elegantly contoured form was decorated with a silver filigree of thorns that wound about the barrel like a living plant. Tiny roses formed from crushed rubies glittered among the tangle-like specks of blood. Along with her scars this weapon was all that remained of her second life.

‘She is called Tristesse,’ Father Deliverance says tenderly. ‘It means sorrow, for that is what she promises those who defy the God-Emperor’s will. She is a relic of the Thorn Eternal, gifted to me by our fearsome Sister, the Canoness Excruciant.’ He smiles ruefully. ‘But I am no warrior, so I in turn pass her on to you, my Vigilant Paladin.’

They are alone in this chambers aboard the crusade’s flagship, a situation that would be unthinkable with any other man. The room is austerely furnished, like the cell of a common monk, for Father Deliverance believes that comfort encourages souls to cleave too avidly to their mortal shells.

‘Does she please you?’ he asks solemnly.

‘It – she – is beautiful,’ Asenath replies, her voice filled with awe as she studies the exquisite weapon. She has only just entered the confessor’s service and his force is still en route to its destination, with many weeks of travel ahead. She has had no opportunity to prove herself, yet he has already named her his personal champion, elevating her above the Celestians of the Thorn Eternal who have fought beside him for years. And now this...

‘I am unworthy, your reverence,’ she says. It takes every shred of her will to
admit it and proffer the weapon to him.

‘If you are unworthy then so am I, for I have chosen you from among countless others, Asenath Hyades.’ Father Deliverance places a hand on her shoulder. ‘Do you believe I am unworthy, my Sister?’

‘We were all unworthy,’ Asenath answered. All save the Resplendent Angels, which is why they renounced us.

She took the gun from its case and her finger slipped beneath the trigger guard with easy familiarity, as if she had never forsworn the weapon. Tristesse shone in her grip, eager to make her the agent of its justice once more. Asenath shuddered as a thrill of rapture ran through her body. It felt like a betrayal, the exchange of a beloved gift for a hated one, but against the corruption stalking their vessel a gun would be more puissant than a quill. It would be folly to spurn such a weapon now. Besides, the darkness had already destroyed her canoness’ gift.

Asenath snapped the ammo clip into place and slid the pistol into her medicae bag. The act felt symbolic. Had she taken a step closer to the twisted paragon of Mercy she had seen in the chapel?

*She had my face...*

‘No,’ Asenath promised herself as she headed for the door. ‘I will die before I embrace her.’

II

‘Platoon Darkstar-Red, you are clear to disembark,’ the drop-ship’s pilot voxed. ‘Commence Breach Aescher!’

‘Blood-tight!’ Toland Feizt yelled as he threw the hatch open and leapt from the hovering vessel, his bolt rifle braced against his armoured chest. He landed hard on the xenos structure below and the ground creaked hollowly under the impact. Feizt glanced down and saw lacquered wooden tiles beneath his bare feet. He blinked in confusion and reality twisted back into shape, revealing his iron-shod boots and the white crystal skin of an utterly alien realm. The translucent substance underfoot was threaded with silver filaments that pulsed with blue light.

*It’s alive,* Feizt thought with disgust. *This whole damn place is alive.*

As his fellow Breachers thudded down around him he surveyed the glittering landscape ahead. From a distance the xenos anomaly had looked like a silvery ball hanging in space, but up close it was more like a spherical web of spun glass. Its strands coiled about one another, spiralling up and down through the
structure in a labyrinth of connected pathways. There were no straight lines or hard angles and everything appeared to be formed from the same living crystal, like the place had been woven rather than assembled.

*Or grown?*

At the sphere’s periphery, where Darkstar Company had deployed, the strands meshed into broad plateaux, but further in they branched repeatedly, narrowing with every division. Towards the core the Breachers would have to proceed in single file, Feizt gauged. That wasn’t great, but it was no different to the cramped corridors and tunnels they had navigated elsewhere.

*Wrong,* he corrected himself with a chill of foreboding. *This isn’t like anything we’ve seen before.*

‘I’m reading an atmosphere, breach sergeant,’ Specialist Schroyder voxed over the platoon’s channel. ‘It’s cold as loxatl blood, but breathable.’

‘Don’t matter,’ Feizt replied, eyeing the black nothingness between the strands. There were no walls or energy shields holding back the void – at least none their eyes or sensors could detect – yet there was gravity here, so maybe there was breathable air too, but only a fool would trust it. ‘We stay void-sealed, brothers. Repeat, void-sealed!’

His helmet vox pinged back acknowledgements from the other platoon leaders, including Captain Froese, who was leading the force deployed on the far side of the sphere. Decisions like this were really the captain’s to make, but as always, he had deferred to Feizt in the field. Things always went more smoothly that way, even if their bloody commissar didn’t like it. As usual Lemarché was tagging along with Feizt’s platoon, tacitly marking it as the weakest link in the company’s chain. The commissar’s scarlet-striped carapace armour was a stain on Darkstar-Red’s pride, but Feizt couldn’t afford to think about that right now. With luck their shadow wouldn’t make it out of this mission alive.

‘Form up around me, brothers,’ Feizt ordered as the last of his platoon landed and the drop-ship roared away. ‘Standard wedge! Santino, I want that Bruiser live!’

‘Already on it, chief!’ the Blast Trooper voxed back.

‘This is an unholy dominion,’ Zevraj said, his voice filled with superstitious awe. ‘We should have purged it from space, comrades.’ Though he was standing beside Feizt, their airtight armour muted regular speech; when a Breacher was void-sealed, his vox and the air tank strapped to his back were his lifelines.

‘Reckon a couple o’ plasma missiles would bring the whole place down,’ Santino said as he finished setting up the platoon’s tripod-mounted heavy bolter.
‘We just gotta make a few cracks to get things started.’
‘Can never tell with xenos tech, though,’ Schroyder cautioned. ‘Always tougher than it looks.’
‘That ain’t the mission anyways,’ Feizt said. ‘We got to go in, brothers.’
‘I know it, chief,’ Santino replied, slamming an ammo band into the big gun, ‘but it don’t make no sense.’

No, it doesn’t, brother, Feizt agreed. Leastwise not to us...

Darkstar Company had been on its way to rest up and resupply at the Exordio orbitals when the order came in to divert to the Askellon Sector for a priority operation. The mission briefing had been sketchy to the point of being non-existent and there was talk someone high up was pulling the strings, maybe even at Inquisition level. It wouldn’t be the first time, though the bastards always kept to the shadows, no matter how things went down. The blind, emerald-robed man who’d boarded their cruiser to observe had exactly the kind of shifty, aloof look about him that spelled trouble in Toland Feizt’s book.

‘Somebody wants a sniff at this thing’s guts,’ he told his men, ‘and we’re the nose, brothers. Always been the…’ Feizt trailed off, frowning.

The crystal vista ahead was beginning to shimmer, as though he were looking at it through a heat haze. Was there something inside it? Squinting, he made out a flickering, wood-panelled corridor superimposed over the alien world. The sight made him nauseous, as if he were being pulled inside out.

‘You seeing this, Darkstar-Red?’ he voxed.

Nobody replied.
‘I said–’

Sudden agony wracked his stomach, tearing his words away. It felt like he’d taken a bolt-round to the guts. He staggered back – and hit a wall.
‘What the…?’ Feizt hissed through the pain, trying to make sense of the nonsense his eyes were feeding him. He was standing in the corridor he had glimpsed through the crystal. He swung round, but his men were gone. In their place was a dark room filled with crates. It looked like some kind of storage space. Woozily he remembered crawling in there when the alarum had sounded.
Wait... what alarum? Feizt thought wildly. What was this place and where was his platoon?
‘Darkstar-Red, do you read me?’ he called, then realised his vox was also gone, along with his helmet and carapace armour. Worst of all, the only weapon he was carrying was a dagger. He raised it and saw the blade was covered in blood. His loose white coveralls were drenched in the stuff.
I killed Glicke, he remembered. Except Glicke was already dead when I did it.
No, that couldn’t be right. Konrad Glicke had been alive and well on the dropship just minutes ago. They’d checked each other’s air tanks.
It’s this xenos hellhole, Feizt realised. It’s messing with my head.
‘Don’t trust anything you see, brothers,’ he snarled into the vox that wasn’t there.
‘Enough, breach sergeant!’ Commissar Lemarché replied on a private channel. At his words the illusory corridor retreated like an outgoing tide, washing away Feizt’s pain and leaving the crystal world in its wake. His comrades were back too, formed up around him with their weapons levelled at the horizon. Their faces were hidden behind tinted visors, but he could imagine their strained expressions.
‘Glicke, call in!’ Feizt ordered on impulse.
‘Breacher Eight blood-tight,’ Konrad Glicke responded.
‘What did you see, breach sergeant?’ Zevraj asked. He was stroking the golden aquila taped to his breast-plate. He claimed it was sinful to hide the holy icon under his armour, but they all knew the truth – Chingiz Zevraj feared it wouldn’t work if he covered it up.
‘Nothin’ moving out there now, chief,’ Santino reported, swivelling his heavy weapon back and forth across the horizon.
‘Breach sergeant, explain yourself,’ Captain Froese demanded on the master channel.
Feizt hesitated, noticing the commissar had come up alongside him. He didn’t want to lie to his brothers, but the truth was liable to get him branded a crazy man in Lemarché’s eyes – or worse, a witch. Did he even believe it himself?
To the void with it, he decided. Don’t know what I saw, but something tried to get into my head.
‘It knows we’re here,’ Feizt warned, broadcasting on the company-wide channel. ‘This place – it looks quiet, but it’s just playing dead. Stay sharp, brothers. This ain’t going to be a clean breach.’
‘Observation noted, sergeant,’ Captain Froese replied. ‘Is your unit in position?’
Feizt realised he hadn’t confirmed his team’s deployment yet. Cursing under his breath, he sent the signal.
‘Received, Darkstar-Red,’ the captain acknowledged. ‘All platoons commence phase two. Take it slow and steady, Breachers.’
‘Darkstar-Red forwards!’ Feizt ordered. ‘Santino, hold the extraction point.’
The platoon advanced in an arrowhead formation, Feizt taking point with twenty-four troopers on either side. A Blast Breacher with reinforced armour and a heavy stubber marched at the tip of each wing, alongside a specialist equipped with an auspec. Feizt knew three other platoons would be mirroring their advance from equidistant points along the perimeter, all converging on the structure’s core. The ship’s cogitators had estimated the sphere’s diameter at a little under six miles; in theory that wasn’t much ground to cover, but there was no telling how tricky things would become once they left the rim, especially if their path started corkscrewing up and down through the anomaly. Somehow Feizt doubted it was going to be easy.

No, it’s going to be a bloody meat grinder! The conviction hit him with such force that he faltered in his advance. It wasn’t a gut feeling. It was hard knowledge: most of the men who entered this labyrinth wouldn’t be coming out again.

Got to turn them around before it happens... again, he thought. Again?
The ground ahead was already beginning to fray into a multitude of strands. He’d have to split up the platoon soon, send squads along different paths in the hope somebody would find a way through to the core.

Nobody ever will, he predicted. Or remembered?

Very soon now, when they were all hopelessly lost in the maze, the crystal would start to sing. And then the Razor Lights would come for them.

Razor Lights? Feizt frowned, trying to identify the word. He felt – knew – it meant something terrible, but the shape behind it eluded him.

‘Breach sergeant, why have you halted?’ Lemarché demanded.

‘Razor–’ Feizt began to say.

Something hit him with startling force. He glanced down and saw an iron bolt jutting from his left shoulder, but the pain it brought was nothing beside the resurgent agony in his belly.

‘I warned you to stand down, off-worlder!’ someone shouted.

Feizt looked up in confusion. He was back in the phantom corridor, but this time he wasn’t alone. A shaven-headed man in a grey tunic was yelling at him, brandishing a short sword. Beside the swordsman a woman in the same uniform was reloading her crossbow.

Candlewards, he remembered blearily as he yanked the bolt from his shoulder.

‘Drop your weapon and get on your knees!’ the man yelled. ‘Now!’

Without a moment’s hesitation, Feizt charged them, his dagger raised. Her eyes widening with panic, the woman fired off a hasty second shot. Feizt tried to
dodge aside, but his reflexes were sluggish and her bolt sliced his left cheek open. As she fumbled for another bolt Feizt slammed into her like a wrecking ball, throwing her from her feet so hard her head cracked against the floor. In the same instant he parried a hack from the swordsman with his dagger. The longer blade scraped along his own until it snagged in his weapon’s upward-curved hilt. With a snarl, Feizt twisted the sword from the Candleward’s grip and slammed a fist into his face.

‘I shouldn’t be here!’ he roared. One punch was more than enough to stun the man, but Feizt followed it up anyway, furious that these scum had ripped him away from his platoon. His third punch broke the man’s neck with an audible snap. The Candleward fell, his legs kicking spasmodically. Feizt glanced at the woman, but she was out cold.

‘Take me back!’ he bellowed at the world, closing his eyes, but when he opened them again he was still in the corridor. ‘Take me back, you bastard!’ But the world wasn’t listening.

Thunder rumbled somewhere overhead, barely muffled by the wooden walls. It brought memories flooding back, though he had no idea whether they were real or not. He was on an ocean-bound ship – a heretic ship that was ferrying him towards a lie. And he wasn’t alone. His brothers were here somewhere, what was left of them at least. Why had he abandoned them?

‘The fly,’ Feizt remembered with loathing. ‘Had to kill the fly.’

It had lured him away from the infirmary after he’d taken down its rotting puppet. Poor twice-dead Glicke had looked like he’d been mouldering for days, his milky white eyes sunk deep into the ruins of his face. The walking corpse hadn’t fought back when Feizt hacked it apart, but the fly had buzzed around them excitedly, as if enjoying the show. Afterwards he’d hunted it through the ship, driven by the absolute certainty he had to kill it, but the little bastard had always stayed just out of reach, drawing him on, taunting him. Somewhere along the way his memories trailed off into darkness.

Feizt slammed a fist into the wall, splintering the wood.

‘Have to get back,’ he rasped. ‘Warn them.’

Warn who? The proud platoon about to enter the Razor’s nest or the mangled ghosts that came out on the other side? How could both be real? His head was pounding, his thoughts strangled by fever and pain. As he tried to untangle them a Candleward charged round the corner ahead. Seeing his fallen comrades, the guard skidded to a halt and raised his crossbow. Feizt hurled his dagger and the man screamed as it slammed into his chest.
Too many of them, Feizt guessed as he strode unsteadily towards his dying foe and tugged his blade free. I need my brothers.

Yes, that made sense. Together they could capture this ghost ship and turn it around – maybe even find a way back to the crystal death trap before the Razor Lights woke up. Feizt hesitated, realising he had no idea where the infirmary was. How big could this place be?

‘Frag it,’ he muttered. Choosing a direction at random, Feizt staggered along the swaying corridor.

III

Jonah completed his prayer of warding and affixed a scroll of castigation to the chapel doors. The portals had already been welded shut and reinforced with iron crossbars, but such mundane precautions wouldn’t hold back the vermin of the warp if they tried to break through. Though the desecrated altar had been destroyed the sacrilege would shine darkly in the Sea of Souls, acting as a beacon for unspeakable things. If they came, only faith or fire would deter them. Sister Genevieve and her thrice-blessed flamer would provide the fire should the articles of Jonah’s faith prove wanting, but he doubted it would come to that. Though he didn’t believe a word of the Imperial Creed, his prayers and wards always carried weight. It wasn’t dogma that empowered such things, but conviction, and Jonah Tythe’s conviction had hardened to stone over the years, even if it wasn’t the kind most Throne-fearing folk would recognise.

‘Don’t touch the doors, Sister,’ he cautioned the armoured woman beside him. ‘No matter what you hear within.’

Sister Genevieve nodded, her expression serene. Celestian Superior Xhinoa had warned Jonah that the fifth member of her squad was bound by a vow of silence she would only break in a dire emergency. The flame icon branded beneath Genevieve’s right eye marked her as a Celestian Ignis, a warrior who revered the cleansing properties of fire above all others. She had certainly applied her passion scrupulously in the chapel when she burned the corpses of the monks, showing no hint of disgust at the stench of charred flesh. To his surprise, Jonah found her a little unsettling.

She reminds me of you, Mina, he thought. Despite her flawless ebony complexion there was a fey quality about Genevieve that was uncannily reminiscent of his pale sister. Of course, Mina would be much older than this woman now…
He realised he was staring at the silent warrior.

‘I leave this burden in your care, valiant Celestian,’ he said, offering a blessing. ‘May the God-Emperor ward you during your vigil.’

But don’t count on it, Jonah thought as he walked away. He didn’t believe the Imperium’s distant god gave a damn about His subjects. More to the point, he was pretty sure the ancient fraudster was long dead, even if His great con on humanity was still running strong. The heretical book Jonah had stolen was right – only a fool would swallow the lies proclaiming mankind’s manifest destiny, or any other higher purpose for that matter. The only truths were the ones men and women wrought themselves, and even the finest were etched in sand.

Did you ever believe your own lies? Jonah asked the Corpse-God he professed to serve. He doubted anybody knew the answer or ever would, least of all the zealots of the Ecclesiarchy.

‘But you talk a good game, brothers,’ Jonah admitted as he climbed a staircase, heading for the infirmary. Sister Asenath had asked him to address her patients – perhaps steady their nerves with a sermon and a few blessings. It was the kind of thing he could do in his sleep now, but rousing words could work miracles upon common men. That was how the Imperium duped millions into pointless deaths every day.

And so it goes, he brooded. Round and round, but always down.

He turned a corner and collided with a monster. The brute towered over him, its misshapen, muscle-bound torso spattered with gore. Bloodshot eyes glared at him from a craggy face that mirrored his surprise. Before Jonah could retreat the stranger grabbed his robe and yanked him forwards, bringing his face level with its own.

‘You want to live, priest?’ the beast growled, pressing a dagger to his throat.

‘I’m not afraid to die,’ Jonah answered, thinking fast as he weighed up the creature. His attacker was wearing dirty white coveralls. Despite its twisted form it was a man. The missing Guardsman… ‘But you don’t want to kill me, soldier.’

‘Don’t I?’ The trooper’s breath stank of decay.

He’s sick, Jonah gauged, almost dead on his feet.

‘Tell me why I don’t, priest?’

‘We’re both strangers here,’ Jonah said, looking for an angle. He had to play this carefully. There was a predatory sharpness about this man that sickness hadn’t blunted. If anything, it made him more dangerous.

Jonah settled on paranoia.
'There’s something unholy on this vessel, soldier. We can both feel it.’
‘You ain’t wrong there,’ the Guardsman rasped.
‘I am here to destroy it!’ Jonah urged, putting steel into his voice. Inspiration struck him: ‘I am working with Sister Asenath.’
For a moment his captor looked uncertain, then he pressed the blade closer.
‘Need to… free my men…’ He broke into a hacking cough, but his knife didn’t waver. ‘Lost. Can’t find… way back.’
‘I know the way,’ Jonah promised. ‘We’ll go together, friend.’ It was all he could think of.

‘The body must be burned without delay,’ Asenath declared, stepping away from the corpse on the infirmary floor. It was already beginning to liquefy under its coverings and the stench was nauseating, but that was the least of her concerns. The rate of putrefaction was unprecedented in her experience. Unnatural.

The Guardsmen gathered around her were silent, watching her every move with haunted eyes. They looked like they’d aged ten years since she last saw them, all their bravado gone. Only their commissar appeared unaffected. Ichukwu Lemarché had donned his full dress regalia and attached his prosthetic leg, making himself an exemplar of order among the lost souls he shepherded. For once Asenath was grateful for his presence.

‘Is this to be our fate too, blessed Sister?’ Zevraj asked, giving voice to the fear in all their hearts. Was it already happening?
‘The healers of the Bronze Candle are among the finest in the Imperium,’ Asenath assured him. ‘They will aid us.’
‘We cannot stay here,’ Hörka croaked through his bruised throat. ‘Not here!’
‘Ork’s right, Sister,’ Santino said. ‘You gotta move us. This place ain’t clean.’
‘There are flies,’ Hörka added, spitting in disgust.
‘You are mistaken, trooper,’ Lemarché said. ‘There are no flies here.’
‘I heard ’em too, commissar,’ Santino pressed. ‘Been buzzin’ round my bunk all night.’

As if some unspoken barrier had been broken more of the men piped up, their voices rising to an unruly clamour.

The commissar rapped his cane on the ground. ‘There are no flies!’

Silence fell over the room. The troopers eyed each other warily, waiting for someone to deny it.

‘I will scour the air with consecrated incense,’ Asenath promised. ‘And I have asked a priest to bless the infirmary. He will be with us shortly.’ She had seen no
flies herself, but these men undoubtedly believed in the vermin. That was dangerous enough.

‘You have our thanks, good Sister,’ Lemarché said, then pointed his cane at the cadaver. ‘Santino, Hörka, bear our fallen comrade from the infirmary. Sister Asenath will see that you are granted passage.’

‘Ain’t touching it,’ Santino muttered, backing away from the corpse. Hörka nodded in mute agreement, his eyes wide.

‘We will incinerate the remains here,’ Asenath said quickly, seeing the flash of fury in the commissar’s eyes. It would be unwise to push these men right now. Besides, the corpse would likely disintegrate if they attempted to move it.

‘Sister Indrik!’ she called to their guard. ‘I require your assistance.’

The imposing Battle Sister appeared in the doorway, her meltagun covering the room. ‘I cannot leave my post,’ she rumbled from behind her visor.

‘As you are aware, the Celestian Superior has granted me authority over this matter,’ Asenath said levelly. ‘I will vouch for the honour of these men. They will not attempt to leave. Am I correct, Commissar Lemarché?’

‘Absolutely,’ he replied. ‘We are all comrades here, Sister Indrik.’ He turned to Reiss. ‘Lieutenant, move the troops back.’

‘Please, Sister,’ Asenath urged the Celestian as the men shuffled towards the rear of the room. ‘This must be done now, lest the taint spreads further.’

The warrior hesitated a moment, then strode towards her.

Why does she always keep her face covered? Asenath wondered. What is she hiding under there? Nothing felt right about her cradleworld anymore. Wherever she turned she sensed secrets, lies and the promise of corruption.

Indrik knelt with unexpected grace, angling her gun to avoid burning through the floor. With a bright flash and a whoosh of superheated air the corpse was reduced to a pile of oxidised bones and ashes.

‘Lose the melta!’ a harsh voice shouted.

Asenath looked up. Toland Feizt was standing in the doorway, one arm wrapped around Jonah Tythe, a dagger pressed to his throat. ‘Do it now or I’ll send the priest to the void.’

It’s full of flies, Feizt thought, staring at the infirmary in revulsion. The insects were flitting about everywhere, swarming over the bedbound wounded in great black clusters, even crawling over some of the able-bodied men, but nobody seemed to care. His brothers’ faces registered surprise, relief, joy, confusion – all of it for him – but not the disgust that should be there.
Nobody else can see them, Feizt realised. That was why the first fly had tricked him away – the queen fly. She’d sneaked back here and multiplied unseen, leeching off his brothers while he couldn’t protect them, bleeding them dry, body and soul…

‘Toland!’ It was Sister Darkstar. She had stepped in front of the armoured woman with the meltagun, her arms raised. ‘You must let the priest go.’

‘Tell her… to drop… gun!’ Feizt shook his head violently, fighting to find the words, let alone put them together. The sibilant droning and scuttling in the room was like an orchestral version of the first fly’s earlier solo. It was gnawing at his mind, chewing up his thoughts before they could harden.

‘You’re seeing things, aren’t you?’ Asenath said, approaching slowly.

‘Flies… see flies.’ But not around you, he noticed. No, they kept well away from Sister Darkstar.

‘What you’re seeing isn’t real, Toland.’

‘Not real…’ Feizt echoed, staring past her at the swarming insects.

‘I’ve seen things too.’ She stopped a few paces away. ‘Terrible things.’

‘Flies?’

‘Worse than flies,’ Asenath said sincerely. ‘But none of it is real.’

‘You’re wrong.’

Feizt gritted his teeth as a new sound cut through the insects’ racket. It was a dissonant, jagged-glass keening, like the lament of something too broken to exist. A glimmer of indigo light flickered into life among the men gathered at the far side of the infirmary.

‘They’re coming,’ he warned as the glimmer burgeoned into a flat, rapidly rotating disc of liquid crystal. It was about a yard in diameter, its scintillant, shifting form almost too bright to look at, not that anybody else could see it anyway. Like the vermin, it was invisible to everyone except him.

No... not quite...

The flies could see it too. They were buzzing about the disc frantically, seemingly incensed by its intrusion on their territory. Those that drew too close to its orbit combusted in noxious green bursts.

‘Listen to me, Toland, whatever you’re seeing, don’t look at it,’ Asenath urged. ‘Looking makes it real.’

Feizt tore his gaze away from the conflicting nightmares and saw her eyes were bright with the terrible pity he had seen before. In that moment he was quite certain she was the best and the worst of them all.

‘Toland…’ Endure...
‘Too late,’ he rasped.
With an electric screech the disc soared towards him, tearing intangibly through everything except the flies, which died in droves in its wake. Feizt closed his eyes as it passed through the hospitaller and engulfed him.

‘Say again, Darkstar-Red,’ Captain Froese voxed. ‘What is too late?’

*I am,* Feizt thought. He opened his eyes to the crystal hell and recognised the moment. Somewhere faraway he heard his knife clattering to the ground and the ghosts of future times yelling at one another – even felt the priest break free of his hold – but he let it all fade away. Nothing in that world mattered. *This* was where he belonged.

While he’d been gone his brothers had continued their ill-fated advance. They were deep inside the labyrinth now, their force divided and scattered along different strands. Feizt was at the head of a single squad, walking along a path so narrow that one misstep might plunge him into the void on either side. The web had just begun to trill its dark song as its pulse quickened at the intrusion. It was probably too late to change things, but he had to try anyway.

‘All units, fall back to the perimeter,’ Feizt broadcast, scanning the glittering web. ‘Double time!’

‘Order overruled!’ Lemarché snapped from his position behind Feizt. ‘We will not abort the mission.’

‘I’m seeing increased activity up ahead,’ Lieutenant Schulze, the commander of Darkstar-Blue voxed, his voice almost drowned by a squall of static. Feizt recalled that Schulze’s squad had got closer to the sphere’s core than any of the others. Not one of them had made it out alive.

‘Looks like blue lights. They’re coming out of the web, moving–’ Schulze’s signal erupted into a screech of white noise. Moments later an eerie, reverberating cacophony echoed through the labyrinth – the cough of gunfire distorted into something almost harmonic.

‘Multiple contacts,’ Captain Froese sent. ‘Unidentified xenos objects. We are engaging.’

*They’re not xenos,* Feizt thought wildly. *They’re something much worse.*

‘Do not engage!’ he voxed urgently. ‘Fall back!’

‘Say again, Darkstar-Red?’

Commissar Lemarché levelled his plasma pistol at Feizt. ‘By the authority invested in me, I decree–’

A large disc of liquecent light soared out of the web and streaked towards the
squad, screaming electronically as it came. As the men raised their weapons it tore right through Breacher Herkenberg at the waist and sped on, making for the crystal tangle on the far side. Blue fire and black smoke vomited from Herkenberg’s wound as it yawned open and the hapless trooper’s upper half toppled into the abyss. His disembodied legs remained standing, held rigid by the arcane energies crackling along them. The squad chased his killer with gunfire, but their bolt-rounds exploded when they entered the disc’s glowing aura. It was gone in seconds, passing into the crystal skein like a ghost. Bullets shattered against the web in the Razor Light’s wake, but didn’t even scuff its glassy surface. ‘We’ve got nothing to touch them!’ Feizt yelled, yanking Lemarché aside as another disc whirled past.

_That’s the one that took his leg, _he remembered. _I changed things!_

Lemarché’s pistol flared as he fired a searing blast of plasma after the retreating entity. It struck the Razor Light’s rim and the thing ruptured like a miniature nova, spewing streamers of light.

_He never had a chance to shoot before, _Feizt realised. _We can hurt them!_

But one gun wouldn’t make much difference – not against the numbers they’d be up against soon. Feizt’s vox was already crackling with urgent reports from other squads as the attack ramped up across the sphere.

‘Commissar, we got to go!’ he urged.

Before Lemarché could reply a Razor Light surged up through the ground beneath him, tilted so it emerged edge first. The commissar leapt aside, but the disc sheared through his right leg, severing the limb just above the knee. Half submerged in the crystal, the thing powered along the pathway towards the rest of the squad like a spectral buzz saw. The trooper behind Lemarché dodged its charge but lost his footing and tumbled into the void as the disc sped past. It ripped through the next man in line, bisecting him from the midriff down in a spray of blood. He screamed as his body splintered under its own weight.

‘For the Emperor!’ the mutilated commissar yelled, firing as he fell to the ground. His plasma blast obliterated the Razor Light along with the shrieking trooper.

_That was Schroyder! _Feizt realised as the charred corpse toppled into the abyss. _But Schroyder survived... last time. Things were changing. _Lemarché had lost a different leg and a man who’d lived before was now dead.

‘Pull our comrades out, breach sergeant,’ Lemarché ordered.

‘Go!’ Feizt bellowed at his squad as he hauled the commissar up. The man was
barely conscious and blood was pumping from the stump of his leg. It was just as well there was an atmosphere here, else such injuries would be fatal in seconds. Feizt prised the plasma pistol from the commissar’s grip then hesitated.

_We could leave him behind this time. Hell, I could even throw the bastard to the void!_

‘I’ll take him, breach sergeant,’ Glicke said, relieving him of the injured man as if he’d heard Feizt’s train of thought. Even amid the carnage the doomed trooper sounded calm.

_It would be best if you fell here, brother_, Feizt thought sadly, remembering the decaying thing he’d hacked – would hack? – apart in the ship’s infirmary. Then again, maybe Glicke’s fate could change too.

_We’ve lost the captain_, ’his vox squawked. _Repeat – Captain Froese is down!_

‘All squads disengage and fall back!’ Feizt broadcast, hurrying after Glicke. The Razor Lights flitted about the men as they retreated through the tangle, but their movements were becoming increasingly erratic, as if they only registered their prey intermittently. Occasionally a disc would swoop towards the squad and Feizt would meet it with a blast of plasma, but the further his team got from the core the less aggressive its sentinels became.

‘What’s in there?’ Feizt muttered to himself. The question had never troubled him before, but now he couldn’t let it go. He kept thinking about the blind man who had instigated this carnage. The bastard was probably monitoring things from the safety of the company’s cruiser, infuriated at losing his prize. ‘What were you looking for?’

As they neared the perimeter they began to run into the remnants of Darkstar-Red’s other squads. All had taken heavy losses and the survivors were badly mauled. From the reports coming in, their fellow platoons hadn’t fared much better. As Feizt expected, there was no word at all from Darkstar-Blue. Just as before, none of Lieutenant Schulze’s men would be coming back. Just as before, Captain Froese had been lost, along with most of the company.

‘What difference did I really make?’ Feizt asked. His squad had got off lightly thanks to Lemarché’s plasma gun, but otherwise the massacre had played out much the same way.

_I didn’t get cut up_, Feizt realised, hammering a fist upon his intact breast-plate. The Razor Lights hadn’t got close to him this time, but that didn’t make up for the slaughter meted out on the company.

_Maybe I can try again_, he thought. _Do it better next time!_

‘No!’ It was a woman, her shout coming from somewhere far away.
Feizt’s head exploded with pain, turning the world bright white for a heartbeat, then he was back in the infirmary. The commissar stood before him, his face impassive as he raised his metal-tipped cane to strike again. Flies circled his high-peaked cap in an unholy halo as he mouthed words Feizt couldn’t hear. Sister Darkstar was stepping towards Lemarché, her hands raised in protest as she yelled silently, with the priest just behind her. Beyond them he saw his comrades’ shocked faces, including a few that hadn’t been there before. But not Schroyder… No, Stefan Schroyder was gone now, erased from this future world like he had never existed.

*It’s all messed up,* Feizt thought as the tableau played out. Everything was tinted blue and moving so slowly it felt like every moment was strained to breaking point, as if the whole world were trying to swim upstream through a curdled river.

‘Shouldn’t… be… here,’ he said, his words distending into a drawn-out groan as Lemarché brought the cane down on his skull with lethargic, yet savage force. Feizt reeled backwards and fell…

…back into the Razor – and over the edge of the pathway he had been standing on.

Time snapped awake, then accelerated into a blur, hurling him into the abyss between the crystalline strands. As he plummeted through the web a Razor Light whirled past him, slicing his belly open as it whizzed by. Feizt laughed through the pain, knowing the wound would be identical to the one he had suffered before. There was no escape and there would be no more chances. It had been too late from the start.

‘*Endure, Toland Feizt!*’ he heard Sister Darkstar urge.

No… It wasn’t her voice. It wasn’t any kind of voice at all really, though its buzzing message was unmistakable. As darkness gathered at the edges of his vision and his thoughts began to shut down he realised it was the *fly* talking to him.

It was inside his helmet.
Two days have elapsed since my last accounting. The storm has passed, and with it the madness that besieged our souls. Though the Koronatus Ring is still some five days distant I believe our Exodus is finally over. Under Celestian Superior Xhinoa’s command a precarious calm holds sway over our vessel, but none of us trust it too far. The heretics who defiled the Blood of Demeter’s heart have gone to ground, but they are undoubtedly still among us.

Say it’s not so!

Sister Camille, who I have come to detest, sought to condemn Sergeant Feitz for the chapel’s desecration, citing his twisted physique as a mark of corruption, but I would have none of it. Though the sergeant’s sanity evidently snapped under the duress of Exodus, leading to the tragic deaths of two Candlewards, I do not believe Feitz is capable of such atrocity. Artistry! The adoration of his comrades and the tales they tell of his courage bear witness to a harsh, but honourable man who would never embrace heresy. In any case Toland Feitz will likely perish before we reach the Ring. His old wounds have festered and the new ones Commissar Lemarché inflicted with such enthusiasm may have caused lasting damage to his brain, though it is impossible to say with any certainty, for Feitz has not awoken since the incident in the infirmary. At the Celestian - Superior’s insistence he has been confined to a separate cabin under constant watch.
As to my other charges, a semblance of order has been restored among them. Much as I dislike Commissar Lemarché, his competence in matters of discipline subjugation is unquestionable unforgivable, but I believe the greater balance of credit for the Breachers’ improved spirits lies with the priest who travels with us.

Jonah Tythe is an enigma to me. I have only known one man who could address a congregation with such skill, melding fervour and camaraderie into something unbreakable yet fluid enough to convince every listener his words are intended for them alone. Though the effect of his sermons is welcome, witnessing them disturbs me. Perhaps my second life has soured me to such rhetoric, but whenever Tythe preaches I see a performance, not a man speaking from the heart. And yet, despite his artifice, I believe there is also a streak of nobility in him. He took my side in petitioning clemency for Feizt, then assisted me diligently through the long hours I laboured to stabilise the wounded man. His piety may be contrived, but his compassion appears genuine. However, such contradictions are not why I am drawn to the priest.

Oh, pray do tell, Sister?

Like myself, I sense that Jonah Tythe has come to Vytarn for a purpose – something altogether more consequential than the transparent ruse of research he has offered. Whoever this man is, he is no bookish scholar and I am certain our paths have not crossed by chance. Before we reach the Ring I have resolved to learn whether he is destined to be a friend or a foe in the coming struggle.

‘That was quite a climb, Sister,’ Jonah said, hauling the heavy hatch of the beacon chamber closed behind him as he entered.

‘But one worthy of the effort,’ Asenath replied without turning from the vista below. From the watchtower’s heights the ocean looked like a smooth, wine-dark mirror, with the grey slab of the ship its only blemish. Had that wine turned sour? Under the bright, clear sky of Vytarn’s twinned dawn that seemed impossible, but serenity could be the most adept of deceivers.

‘It is a humbling sight,’ Jonah observed, joining her by the glass-walled precipice. ‘I’ve never been on a world with two suns.’

The circular chamber atop the tower was virtually the highest point on the vessel, only exceeded by the sensor vanes and lightning rods bristling from its bronze dome. A huge, many-faceted lumen globe dominated the room’s centre, its surface acid-etched with holy script. Beyond the chamber’s glass walls seven massive bells hung from rods jutting from the dome at even intervals. In a storm
they would swing about on their chains like giant censers, emitting light and incense as they rang to ward the vessel from evil.

‘It is said the Torn Prophet always faced Exodus from the beacon tower of the vessel They travelled upon,’ Asenath said solemnly.

‘They?’

‘Yes, that is how we refer to the Prophet. Nobody knows whether the First of the Last was male or female, or perhaps some hallowed amalgam of the two.’ Her voice fell into the flowing cadence of a storyteller. ‘Many believe the Last Candle was founded by twins – a brother and sister descended from a forgotten saint who discovered Vytarn in a dream. Others claim she was an archmagos of the Adeptus Mechanicus who decoded the Gospels Illuminant from the secret geometry of the Koronatus Ring, and in so doing splintered her mind into seven independent paradigms, each enshrined in one of the Seven Spires. The Sisters of the Iron Candle assert he was a fallen Adeptus Astartes warrior who redeemed himself by defeating a daemon at the heart of this world. Through that victory he was exalted by divine revelation, though the battle left him physically broken. There are nine prominent origin stories and countless tangential myths.’

‘Surely there’s a record,’ Jonah said sceptically. ‘The Last Candle is scarcely a thousand years old.’

‘There are many records.’ Asenath ran her fingers along the misted glass before her. ‘Look for an answer and you shall find evidence of much, but proof of nothing, precisely as the Torn Prophet intended.’

‘And what do you believe, Asenath Hyades?’

‘I believe it does not matter,’ she replied. ‘It is not the truth of the answer that has significance, but the sincerity of the seeker. Ambiguity encourages the devout to find themselves in the God-Emperor’s Light.’

‘The Imperial Creed isn’t much inclined towards ambiguity, Sister.’

‘Which is why the Last Candle rarely shares such reflections with outsiders. The ignorant see corruption in everything they fail to understand.’

‘A heretic might say the same thing.’

‘They might,’ Asenath agreed, erasing the marks she had made on the glass. ‘I have certainly known some who have, and put my share of them to the sword.’ She knew they were on dangerous territory now, but there was no avoiding it if she wanted to get his measure. If her instincts were wrong and he proved to be an obdurate fanatic it would be better to settle the matter sooner rather than later. That was why she had chosen this remote place for their meeting.

‘Do you think I am a heretic, brother?’ This would be the moment of his truth.
Asenath’s grip tightened on the bolt pistol hidden under her robes.

‘It sounds like you’re still loyal to the Last Candle,’ he replied carefully.

‘I remain loyal to its principles, yes. We believe the God-Emperor’s divine plan is subtler than the orthodoxy preaches. Aeons of strife have eroded His true intent.’

‘Which was?’

‘Surely you mean is, priest?’ Asenath finally turned to face him. ‘The God-Emperor is as eternal as His vision.’

‘I stand corrected.’ Jonah inclined his head, but there was a sour edge in his voice now. Clearly she had hit a raw nerve. ‘Tell me then, Sister, what is His true intent for mankind?’

‘The Last Candle has been striving to decipher that since its inception. That is its sacred purpose.’

‘Meaning you don’t know.’

‘The Torn Prophet was blessed with the seeds of revelation, but they must be nurtured before they will bear fruit. Only through rigorous contemplation and reverence will we attain enlightenment.’ Asenath was surprised by the strength of her conviction. Despite all the troubling things she had experienced since her return she still had faith in her old sect’s mission. ‘We believe mankind is destined to rule the stars, but we do not accept that our fate is war without end.’

‘It’s unusual to hear a Battle Sister talk that way.’

‘It is unusual for a preacher to listen,’ Asenath countered. She didn’t deny the title he had given her. She had become a warrior again the moment she reclaimed her weapon. Tristesse felt restless in her hand, impatient to dispense justice.

_I have kept her muzzled too long_, Asenath sensed. _Perhaps you will be the first to give her succour, Jonah Tythe._

They regarded each other in silence. Eventually Jonah drew a lho-stick from his pouch. ‘Why are we talking?’ he asked as he lit the narcotic. ‘What do you want from me, Sister Asenath?’

‘I want to know why you have come to the Candleworld.’

‘I’ve already told you. I’m here about a book.’

‘You are no researcher.’

‘I never said I was.’ He smiled thinly. ‘Leastwise, not to you, though I admit that’s the story I told the quill-pushers back at the space port.’

‘I am surprised you were granted passage to the Ring. The Last Candle rarely welcomes visitors.’
‘I was invited.’
‘Invited?’ Asenath couldn’t hide her surprise. ‘By whom?’
‘A man called Olber Vedas.’
Asenath frowned. She didn’t know the name… and yet… A memory slipped into place out of nowhere. At first the knowledge felt anomalous, dislocated from any rationale, but the longer she focused on it the more grounded it became. Supporting facts and impressions slithered from the name like neural tendrils, worming their way deeper into her memories. Within seconds she knew exactly who Olber Immanuel Vedas was. Indeed she was shocked that she could have forgotten the sect’s most prominent living theologian. Vedas had been one of the Last Candle’s guiding lights for almost seventy years. Another spontaneous memory bloomed – he was the current provost of the Lux Novus, the sect’s schola progenium.

‘What’s wrong?’ Jonah asked, his eyes narrowing.
‘Nothing is wrong. How do you know of the Theologus Exegessor?’
‘We go back a long way, Sister.’ He was watching her intently. ‘But you didn’t know him, did you? Just for a moment there the name meant nothing to you.’
‘That is absurd.’
‘It is,’ he agreed, ‘but that’s how it works sometimes.’
‘How what works?’
‘The world.’ Jonah shook his head. ‘It’s all tangled up in itself. Maybe even broken. I’ve seen things change, then change again, like they were being shuffled over and over. Nothing’s set in stone anymore, if anything ever was. The more you look at it, the more you see the cracks.’ He inhaled deeply from his lho-stick and Asenath noticed his fingers were shaking. ‘You’ve seen it too, Sister – the violation – even if you didn’t recognise it.’
‘I…’ Asenath hesitated, remembering the contortions of her Exodus and the creeping wrongness of her recurrent nightmare. Yes, violation was exactly the right word for all of it. ‘I have,’ she admitted.
‘Let me guess. You think you’ve come here to fix things.’ He made it sound like an accusation.
‘If that is the God-Emperor’s will,’ she answered. ‘Is that not your intent, priest?’
‘I doubt things can be fixed. I’m just here to find someone.’
‘Vedas?’
‘Him too.’ Jonah flicked the lho-stick aside. ‘We’re on the same road, Sister, likely with the same enemies along the way, so I’ll work with you. Maybe we
can help each other, but there’s only so far we can go together.’ He smiled, but his eyes were cold. ‘Do we have a deal, Asenath Hyades?’

She considered his proposal. Did she trust him? Not really. Was he even sane? Unlikely. Did it matter?

*No, it doesn’t,* she decided. *Not yet, anyway.* She let her finger slip from Tristesse’s trigger. ‘I agree, Jonah Tythe. We shall aid each other until we part ways.’

He nodded and headed for the door, then paused. ‘They’re watching us, you know. Even up here.’

‘I am aware of it,’ Asenath replied. She had spotted the glint of magnoculars on the deck below. ‘But we are strangers here. After all that has happened the Celestian Superior would be remiss to trust us blindly.’

‘Maybe so, but don’t make the mistake of trusting her either.’ The bitterness in his voice was like venom. No, it was more than bitterness – it was pure rage. ‘Nothing is what it seems anymore.’

After he was gone, Asenath remained at the window, deliberating on their conversation. They were both servants of the Ecclesiarchy, yet she had no doubt most of their brethren would condemn them as heretics.

‘Heresy lies in the heart,’ she quoted. ‘Not…’

‘...not in careless words,’ Father Deliverance declares, addressing the advisors seated around the table of his flagship’s war chamber.

‘Careless words are spawned by impure hearts!’ Canoness Morgwyn of the Thorn Eternal protests. Her hatchet face is painted chalk-white, emphasising the scratches raked by the spiky vines hanging from her circlet. ‘These heathens have denied the God-Emperor’s divine word. Before they can be redeemed they must be broken upon the anvil of His wrath!’

‘The armada the Arkan Union has mustered against us is superficially impressive in numbers, but tactically inconsequential,’ Commodore Rand, the fleet commander, observes primly. ‘Our scans indicate their ships possess lamentably primitive weapons and shielding. They outnumber us ten to one, but a single Imperial cruiser could lay waste to their entire fleet without undue peril, though I confess it may take some time!’ He laughs as if he has made a fine joke.

Standing at attention behind Father Deliverance, Asenath grits her teeth against the commodore’s nasal squawk. She has no doubt who would command the destroying vessel; Barnabas Rand is the kind of man who would relish a risk-free battle, though he will doubtless tell the tale differently if he gets his way. She
cannot understand how such a tawdry creature has risen so far in the blessed Imperium.

It is not my place to judge, she reprimands herself, turning her thoughts to the matter at hand. The crusade fleet has finally reached the outer planets of the Providence System, where it has been met by a force of archaic warships, along with a stern warning to depart or face the consequences.

‘Our hesitation is shameful, your reverence,’ Canoness Morgwyn presses. ‘By Throne and Thorn we must carve a bloody and enduring lesson into their souls!’

‘I advise against such a course,’ a deep but mellifluous voice breaks in. ‘These Arkan are not xenos or degenerates, but fellow men with a proud lineage and a culture dating back many thousands of years, perhaps even to Old Terra itself.’

It is ironic to hear such sentiments from a being that is no longer truly human, yet they do not surprise Asenath, for the Space Marine’s nobility cloaks him like an aura, outshining his lustrous armour. Even seated, Artificer Captain Varzival Czervantes of the Angels Resplendent towers over the others in the chamber, but it is his spirit rather than his physical stature that truly eclipses the mortals. His effect on Asenath has not diminished since she first saw him ascending the Perihelion in Father Deliverance’s procession. The abstract painting on his right shoulder pauldron shimmers in the gloom of the war chamber, its enigma as tantalising as ever, while the left bears his Chapter’s emblem – a hooded figure with its arms raised. Asenath has often wondered whether it symbolises reverence or revelation.

‘Our actions here will inform the spirit of all that follows,’ Varzival continues. ‘Have we not journeyed to these lost worlds to welcome our wayward kindred into the Imperium? Conflict will harden their hearts against us, even if it enforces their obedience.’

‘They are a faithless rabble who spit upon the Imperial Creed,’ Morgwyn snarls. ‘That cannot go unanswered!’

‘And you would answer their ignorance with slaughter?’ Varzival asks calmly. ‘Is their belligerence so surprising? We have commanded them to kneel before empty words.’

‘Empty words?’ the Canoness Excruciant hisses, her eyes blazing as she rises from her seat.

‘They are empty until we imbue them with substance, my lady.’

‘And what substance is there to your words?’ Morgwyn challenges. ‘Why did you join this crusade, Resplendent? What do you want from these Arkan? Your Chapter is not renowned for its piety.’
‘We serve the Golden Throne in our own manner.’
‘With pretty baubles and paintings!’
‘Is that all you imagine we are?’ Though the Space Marine’s tone remains civil there is a subtle shift in his bearing that makes Asenath catch her breath. Suddenly she is quite certain that Varzival Czervantes is the most dangerous being she will ever meet. She has only conversed with him once, shortly after their crusade was underway, when he sought her out to question her about the Candleworld with a guileless fascination that was almost childlike. There is nothing childlike about him now.
‘You have never seen the Resplendent in battle, have you canoness?’ he asks softly.
‘And I do not believe I ever will,’ Morgwyn mocks.
Despite the tension, Asenath feels more excitement than apprehension. More than anything else she wants to see this magnificent warrior make good on his words and fight, for it would surely be a glorious spectacle.
‘That is enough!’ Father Deliverance slams a fist on the table. It is the first time Asenath has seen his composure waver, though it will not be the last. ‘We are fellow heralds of the God-Emperor’s Light. This discord among us is unbefitting of His trust in us.’
‘I stand corrected, Father,’ Morgwyn murmurs. Offering the sign of the Bleeding Aquila, she sits, but Asenath senses no contrition in her. Indeed her manner is almost… contemptuous… though surely that cannot be.
The confessor’s thunderous expression breaks into its familiar benevolent smile. ‘It appears we stand at a fork in the road, my children,’ he says. ‘Does the God-Emperor intend us to meet these heathens with diplomacy or fury?’
‘We will bow to your wisdom, your grace,’ Commodore Rand assures him.
‘And I will bow to the instincts of my Throne-blessed champion.’ Father Deliverance stands and places a hand on Asenath’s shoulder. ‘Tell me, my Vigilant Paladin, what shall it be? The open hand or the wrathful blade?’

‘Why did you place the burden upon me?’ Asenath whispered. ‘Who was I to choose?’
Yet choose she had, answering without a moment’s hesitation. At the time she had believed it was the God-Emperor speaking through her – believed it because she wanted it to be true. Later, after the carnage had spread like wildfire across the worlds they had come to save, the first flickers of doubt had begun to break through her conviction, but she had squeezed her mind shut against them. By
then she needed to believe.

‘Was it the answer you wanted?’ she asked her mentor. But what did that really matter? Either way, the choice had been hers.

Asenath caught sight of the grey-robed figure of Jonah crossing the deck far below. She watched as he stopped at the railings, presumably intent upon his own brooding. The rage he had let slip at the end of their conversation disturbed her more than his words.

*Who are you really, Jonah Tythe?* Asenath wondered.

Something in the distance caught her eye and she squinted. There was a small snag on the horizon. Perhaps it was only a trick of the twinned-light, but she suspected it was the first sign of their destination. Only a few days ago that prospect would have made her heart soar, but now she only felt dread.

Clutching the ship’s railings in a white-knuckled grip, Jonah breathed hard, fighting to contain his fury. It felt like a living thing writhing in his guts – a spiny serpent forged from red-hot coals, eager to chew and tear and burn its way free.

‘No,’ Jonah snarled through gritted teeth. ‘Not yet.’

Talking openly about the metaphysical sickness had been a mistake. Putting it into words brought it out into the open – made it more real. And that in turn stoked the rage he had kept tethered for so long.

‘Mina,’ he hissed.

*And once again Jonah is hurtling through the tangled streets of the night-bound hive, all caution and stealth abandoned. Nothing matters now except speed. His sister’s terror-stricken face flashes before him with every heartbeat, like a pulse of guilt. The silver-eyed addict has tricked him – lured him away from her.*

‘You won’t have her!’ he vows through torn breaths, over and over.

*His frantic charge carries him back to the sanctuary block in half the time it took to reach the shrine, yet he is still too late, as he has always known he would be.*

The door of their wretched apartment is locked, but Mina is gone. He finds her clothes lying beneath the shuttered window where he last saw her, as if she had walked right through it, shedding them in the process. There are tiny pieces of coloured glass scattered atop the bundle. It takes Jonah several seconds to recognise them as the shattered globes of his sister’s beloved rosary beads, then several more to realise they have been painstakingly organised into rudimentary words.
The message is simple: **Finish it.**
‘I will,’ Jonah vows. ‘And then I’ll come for you.’

Falling to his knees, he pulls the hateful tome from beneath his jacket. He has no doubt that this is another trap, but he’ll risk whatever heresy and horror the book harbours if it will lead him to his quarry, for that is surely its purpose.

Finish it.

He reads the opening passage, though he can already recite that part like a prayer, then hesitates, understanding there can be no going back.

‘Nothing to go back to anyway,’ he says and turns the page.

The next is blank, as is the one after, and the one after that. With growing fury, he flips through the book, but there is nothing more. Following its arcane exordium the tome is completely empty.

Numbly Jonah lets the book slip from his fingers. It is a long time before he understands what his nemesis wants of him.

*Are you really here, Mina?* Jonah wondered. *Or is this world just another dead end?*

No, this time it would be different. The message that had drawn him to Vytarn was too well informed to be anything but authentic… and its bearer too disturbing to ignore. There could be no doubt about the sender’s identity. And he had a name now.

‘I have your book, you silver-eyed bastard,’ he said, making it a threat. The tome was with him now, strapped above his heart, exactly where he’d been carrying it on that fateful commission, so long ago. It went with him everywhere, as much a part of him as the organ that beat beneath it.

‘It’s almost done,’ Jonah said, placing a hand on the book’s dead weight. ‘And I’m coming for you.’
‘The past is always present in our thoughts, as mutable and uncertain as any future, for the only reality is the one we imagine, and imagination is the most inconstant of all qualities.’

– The Torn Prophet

The Gospels Illuminant
Chapter Five
CHARITY

I

The Testimony of Asenath Hyades – Fifth Statement

After much travail our journey is finally coming to an end. I write these words from the ship’s beacon tower as we make our final approach to the Koronatus Ring. Two nights ago I spied the glimmer of the First Light on the horizon. It was a blessed sight for I had begun to fear the sacred flame atop the Perihelion had been extinguished, and with it whatever hope remains to me.

Far too late!
Each morning since, I have returned to this vantage point and watched the peaks of the blessed archipelago grow a little taller, like stone fingers rising from the ocean. The Perihelion mount at the circle’s centre was the first to reveal itself, for its height is almost twice that of its lesser brethren. It towers some three thousand feet above the waterline, the lowest five hundred of them falling away into a near-vertical drop on all sides. Long ago the most courageous of the sect’s Battle Sisters would climb this precipitous cliff as a trial of faith, but the practice was forbidden after the death toll grew too burdensome. To quote the ever-prudent Canoness Agneitha the Wakeful, ‘I hath not Sisters enough to spare for the feeding of fish.’ HAH!

Three days ago the majesty of the Perihelion was fully revealed. Its summit is sheathed in the white marble edifice of the great cathedral, the Candelabrum, whose central minaret bears the holy fire in its seven-faceted lantern chamber. Below this soaring tower the cathedral unfolds beneath a canopy of shining
domes that cluster about the peak like silver mushrooms. In keeping with the decrees of the Gospels Illuminant the building is heptagonal in form, with each face aligned to one of the Ring’s seven encircling mountains and set with a vast stained-glass window venerating its corresponding virtue.

**Like seven manacles of servitude enchaining the soul!**

Where the cathedral ends, the holy city of Sophia Argentum begins. Its precincts cluster about the mountain’s upper reaches in a cascade of elegantly appointed buildings that encompass all the elements of a thriving community. Among its finest monuments are the Librarium Profundis and the Museum Metaphysica of the Silver Candle, for the city is under the auspices of the sect’s Sisters Dialogus, who are scholars without parallel.

While the Sisters of the Iron Candle offer protection, and those of the Bronze succour, it is the learned women of the Silver who are the Last Candle’s most precious servants, for it is they who pore ceaselessly over the Torn Prophet’s writings, scrutinising, correlating and interpreting our founder’s every observation in light of every other. Since the prophet’s disappearance they have diligently sought the sublime concordance of understanding that will unlock true revelation. If the First Light is the sect’s soul, the Silver Candle is its mind.

**And BOTH are equally blind-bound and banal.**

This morning the cobbled coil of the Prophet’s Causeway was clearly visible from the ship. It winds down from the city’s outskirts in a great corkscrew, looping about the mountain nine times before terminating at the crenelated fortress of the Overport, where our vessel is headed. More precisely, we are headed for the Underport, which lies directly below its twin at the foot of the cliff. The two bastions are connected by a mechanised pulley system that hauls a giant silver cage along the cliff, ferrying travellers to and from the sea. This is the only means of safe passage to the realm above, so all but the boldest of souls must pass through the Mirrored Ports.

Thus far I have said little of the Seven Spires, yet they surely encapsulate the divine enigma of the Koronatus Ring more vividly than the Perihelion itself. Arranged like the numerals upon the face of an eldritch Terran timekeeping device, they encircle the central mount in perfect equidistance, both from their parent and from one another. Each is an island in its own right, but all are linked to the Perihelion by sweeping stone bridges that take many hours to traverse on foot. From the base of each mountain a road winds up through a procession of shrines and statuary carved into the raw rock, culminating in a crowning shaming temple at its pinnacle.
Though the spires are mostly alike in height and breadth, each is dedicated to one of the Seven Virtues, which informs its nature both aesthetically and practically. For example, Clementia, the Spire of Mercy, is the domain of the Bronze Candle. Its sombre shrines are consecrated to the Bleeding Angel and it plays host to the order’s hospital, the Sacrasta Vermillion, where our party is bound to die!

Almost as old as the Last Candle itself, the Sacrasta is a sprawling, many-floored estate built into the mountain directly opposite the Clementia Bridge. Its copious wards, laboratoria, surgeries and instruction halls are a labyrinth to the uninitiated, the logic of their layout apparent only to its long-vanished architect. For a place of succour I recall it as being peculiarly disagreeable to the eye and spirit alike. In common with all initiates of the Last Candle’s sisterhood, I spent my first years under the tutelage of the Bronze Candle, learning the fundamentals of healing in that brooding, shadow-haunted place.

I confess my memories of those times are not happy ones.

‘I don’t like the look of it,’ Jonah said as their truck rolled through the wrought-iron gates of the hospital’s courtyard.

‘Nor I,’ Asenath answered from the seat behind him, staring at the building through the vehicle’s rain-streaked windows. The Sacrasta Vermillion looked even more uninviting than she remembered it. Its alabaster façade was cracked and mottled with grime, showing through to the brickwork beneath in places. Two of its decorative towers had collapsed, leaving the gabled roof with a seedy, lopsided aspect, like a broken-toothed smirk. Lightning vanes jutted from the tiles like toothpicks, swaying about in the high wind, while spirevines hung from the gutters, draping the arched windows below in tattered curtains. Many of the windows were dark or blinded by iron shutters, suggesting entire wings had been closed off.

‘It has changed,’ Asenath whispered. Though she had seen intimations of this decay during her youth its progress was dismaying. She prayed the atrophy did not extend to the healers who resided within.

*How did they let it fall so far?* she wondered uneasily.

With a lurch the truck braked to a halt outside the hospital’s double doors. The statue of the Bleeding Angel that loomed over them was worn almost smooth, her face eroded to a vague abstraction, and her wings drooping forlornly.

Light spilled into the gloomy courtyard as the Sacrasta’s doors were flung open and a group of hospitallers hurried from the building, their lanterns throwing
shadows across the cobbled stones.

‘On your feet, Breachers!’ Lieutenant Reiss barked from somewhere behind Asenath. As the troopers crammed into the vehicle obeyed, she rose and grabbed her bag from the rack above. She had been assured the rest of her chattels would follow shortly, but everything that really mattered was already here. Tristesse’s weight felt reassuring as she slipped the bag over her shoulder and headed for the exit hatch.

Despite her misgivings their transfer from the Blood of Demeter had gone smoothly thus far. Three medicae trucks had awaited her party at the Overport, two of them hauling massive wagons filled with gurneys for the seriously injured. A detachment of orderlies in the striped white-and-crimson tunics of the Bronze Candle’s lay personnel had accompanied the vehicles, commanded by a plump, fussily efficient hospitaller.

‘Everything has been arranged, Sister Asenath,’ the woman had announced officiously. ‘A ward has been prepared and our finest healers stand ready to assess your patients.’ She had introduced herself as Sister Solanis, Mother Superior of the Aleph Wing, evidently taking pride in the title, though it meant nothing to Asenath. Every order of the Last Candle had its own convoluted hierarchy.

Each is a law unto itself, she mused, following Jonah from the vehicle. What if the ties that bind them are fraying?

She shivered as she stepped down into the wind-lashed courtyard. Their journey along the Perihelion’s crumbling perimeter road, then over the bridge to Spire Clementia, had taken nearly six hours and dusk had set in, accompanied by a steady drizzle of rain.

‘We need to get the wounded inside without delay,’ she told Mother Solanis, who was coordinating the orderlies.

‘I shall see to it, Sister,’ the woman replied. ‘Please go ahead. Palatine Chirurgeon Bhatori has requested that you attend her upon your arrival.’

‘Bhatori?’ Asenath echoed in confusion.

But Akaishi Bhatori died decades ago! The knowledge flashed before her out of nowhere. Sister Initiate Orlanda lost her mind and pushed the old harridan from the window of her study. They cast Orlanda from Clementia’s peak in punishment for her sin and Mother Shiloh the Gentle was appointed the order’s new mistress.

‘Are you well, Sister?’ Solanis asked.

Asenath looked at her blankly as she tried to disentangle her memories. The
recollections were already fragmenting into phantasms, then mere figments before she could get a grip on them. She could *feel* the past reshuffling beneath her, ripping apart and rewriting her memories as it settled into a new and darker paradigm.

*Orlanda cut her own throat and Bhatori lived. Still lives...*

‘Sister Asenath?’

‘Forgive me,’ Asenath murmured. ‘It gladdens my heart to hear that Palatine Bhatori is well.’

‘Indeed, Sister.’ Solanis beamed, but her eyes were as lifeless as painted glass orbs. ‘Our revered mistress has expressed her anticipation at seeing you again. She remembers you well.’

*I look forward to it,* Asenath thought warily. There had been no love lost between her and Bhatori during her apprenticeship and she doubted the intervening years had mellowed the old woman. Indeed the notion seemed preposterous.

‘My first duty is to my patients, Mother Solanis,’ she said. ‘I am sure the palatine will understand the delay.’

‘As you wish,’ the plump hospitaller answered. ‘Come, then.’ She turned towards the truck behind as it disgorged the first of the gurneys bearing the wounded.

‘Are you sure you’ve brought us to the right place?’ Jonah asked, coming up alongside Asenath. He had agreed to accompany her to the Sacrasta and help the troops settle in.

‘Nothing is quite right any more, priest,’ Asenath replied. ‘As you well know.’ But as her eyes strayed back to the dismal building she found herself wondering just how *wrong* things might be here.

II

‘I can’t eat this,’ Breacher Santino said, turning his spoon over glumly. The green mush the orderlies had served the troops clung to the utensil for several seconds before slopping back into his bowl.

‘Taste good to me,’ Hörka grunted from across the table. He was shovelling the stuff through his beard as if he hadn’t eaten in days.

‘That’s ’coz your mouth’s a crap-can, Ork,’ Santino suggested. ‘Can’t taste worse than it already is.’

‘Medicine is not meant to be flavourful, comrade,’ Zevraj chided him.
‘Ain’t medicine though, is it, deacon?’

‘It contains medicine, Santino,’ Zevraj said. ‘We must trust our benefactors and give thanks to the God-Emperor for delivering us, yes.’

The walking wounded – just thirteen men now – were gathered around a long table in the hospital’s refectory. Other than the orderlies standing by the doors they were alone, and their voices echoed eerily through the big hall.

_Are we the only patients here?_ Ichukwu Lemarché wondered as he listened to the troops’ banter. The possibility heightened the disquiet he’d felt since their arrival, though he could find no obvious cause for concern. Despite the hospital’s dilapidated exterior its custodians appeared competent. They had shepherded the able-bodied troopers through a succession of corridors to a ward on the ground floor, then ferried their less fortunate comrades in on trolleys. As a commissar, Lemarché had been offered private quarters, but he had declined. His place was with his men.

_Only forty-eight of us left now_, he reflected. Franké and Hombach had succumbed to the Razorblight during the last days of their voyage, though mercifully without the grotesquerie that had dogged Konrad Glicke’s death. Indeed, after the storm passed, life had settled into a welcome routine. Even the troops’ obsession with phantom flies had evaporated. By all reasonable measures the worst was over, yet Lemarché couldn’t shake off the feeling that their situation had somehow grown more perilous.

‘What do you make of them, commissar?’ Reiss asked quietly from the place on Lemarché’s right. ‘The Sisters?’

‘What do you make of them, lieutenant?’

‘They’re Adepta Sororitas. I know I shouldn’t question them…’ Reiss trailed off uneasily.

‘But?’ Lemarché prompted.

‘This place… It feels off to me, sir.’

_Off. Like a perfumed corpse,_ the commissar thought darkly. Beneath the omnipresent scent of purifying oils there was a dank, earthy stench permeating the Sacrasta. The building smelled more like a mausoleum than a hospital.

‘We will keep watch tonight, lieutenant,’ he said. ‘Just you and I for now. There is no purpose in agitating the troops.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Reiss looked relieved.

_His instincts are sound, but he doesn’t trust them_, Lemarché judged. His disappointment in the officer had grown over their journey. The Razor had cut away something more vital than flesh or bone in Vanzyn Reiss. That might
prove a problem.

‘Where’d they take the chief?’ Corporal Pynbach demanded through a mouthful of gruel. ‘That’s what I want to know. They wheeled everyone else in after us, but not him.’ There were mutters of support from around the table.

Lemarché sighed. Would these men never let their aberrant champion go? Even after the debacle in the infirmary their faith in the breach sergeant was undiminished. Though Feizt had been kept in isolation on the ship Sister Asenath had brought word of him every day, keeping the Breachers’ unhealthy obsession alive.

*I should have hit him harder,* Lemarché mused. *Finished him.*

But he had struck twice, not holding back either time, and it had made no difference. Toland Feizt had simply refused to die. Even the Razor hadn’t been able to end him.

The memory surfaced with sudden, vicious force – the doomed Breacher expedition retreating through the xenos labyrinth, hunted by whirling discs of light, then Feizt’s bellow of pain as he is struck by something unseen and hurled into the abyss between the crystalline paths – lost with their escape in sight.

As Lemarché’s drop-ship sweeps away with the survivors, the Razor blooms into a spiral of indigo light and vanishes, presumably returning to whatever hell spawned it. An Imperial transponder signal remains in its wake, drawing the ship’s sensors to a solitary figure suspended in the void. It is a Breacher, his armour improbably sealed and functional, his life signs erratic, but insistent. Lemarché knows who the survivor is before they recover him, for it could never be anyone else. It... never was.

‘Is that how it happened?’ Lemarché murmured. The recollection was vivid, yet slippery, like something salvaged from a fever dream. Still nascent…

‘I don’t understand, commissar?’ Reiss answered.

*I don’t either,* Lemarché agreed. *How was your armour intact when your flesh was sliced open within, Feizt?*

‘It is nothing,’ he told Reiss, closing his eyes as the memory hardened under the stress of his regard. He couldn’t doubt its truth, yet he didn’t trust it.

*Why are you still alive, Toland Feizt?*

The world flickers erratically, its confusion running deeper than the superficialities of sight or sound. The man who should be dead pays it no heed. He has grown wise to the Razor’s games, or maybe just too tired to play them. After so long in limbo it is hard to tell the difference anymore.
He feels hard crystal under his back, but also softness. He is lying perfectly still, yet moving at the same time, carried along on something that rattles and whines as it rolls, its song interleaving with the electric keening of the prowling Razor Lights. His eyes are closed, but occasionally he glimpses bright shapes flitting overhead through his eyelids. He cannot tell if they are discs of liquid light or merely lights, nor can he raise the energy to look. Why bother anyway? If the guardians of this realm turn on him then so be it. He is in no shape to do anything about it.

There are voices too, sometimes human, sometimes not, occasionally melded together into something profoundly other. Though he cannot understand their words he is sure they are talking about him. Judging him. Why wouldn’t they be? After all, his enemies have been judging him forever.

Throughout the shifting, seething sirocco of sensations that beset him there is one constant – the ceaseless drone of the seven-legged fly that has fallen into this nightmare alongside him. At first it was inside his helmet, then inside his head, touching him more intimately than anything else ever has. It has tasted his darkest shame, learning that the mishap that twisted his body out of shape was no accident at all. No, he overdosed on the Breacher genhancements wilfully, stealing extra doses from his comrades to make himself something more than them. To rise above them!

The fly sees all this, yet it never judges him. Time flows strangely here and over the fleeting centuries of seconds he has come to realise that he was wrong about the creature. Nothing else could ever be so loyal or generous in its intentions. It has come to him bearing a priceless gift, if only he can find the courage to embrace it. All it asks in return is that he endures.

And lets it in.

‘No,’ Toland Feizt says, as he has said a thousand times before, though he no longer remembers why. ‘No.’

Night had fallen by the time Asenath was satisfied her patients were securely settled. Their ward was chequered with red and white tiles from floor to ceiling, the pattern only broken by the beds lining the walls in neat rows. Silent hospitallers moved among them, making the bedridden troopers ready for the night. The commissar and the walking wounded had not returned from the refectory yet, but Asenath decided it would be imprudent to keep the Sacrasta’s mistress waiting any longer.

Reluctantly she headed for the door. Mother Superior Solanis had confirmed
that Palatine Bhatori’s study was still on the top floor, directly beneath the hospital’s central tower. The Crone’s Nest, Asenath and her fellow initiates had called the place. A summons there had always been unwelcome news, for it invariably meant some transgression had reached the palatine’s notice and censure would be forthcoming. The woman’s punishments had never been less than severe, vindictive even, though Asenath had been too naïve to recognise that at the time. Later she had come to understand the truth: Akaishi Bhatori enjoyed giving pain.

A lesson you learned well, little Sister...

‘I cannot, your reverence,’ Asenath pleads when she realises what her patron wants from her. ‘Please do not ask this of me.’

‘Forgive me, but I must, my daughter,’ Father Deliverance replies. ‘The Sisters of the Thorn Eternal would gladly undertake this duty, but I fear their ardour outstrips their ability for such... procedures. I doubt they can secure the cooperation of our captive before he expires.’ He lowers his head sorrowfully. ‘Regrettably there is a craft to such enterprises.’

Once again they are alone in his austere quarters aboard the crusade’s flagship. It is where he always summons her when he is troubled, and he has good reason to be troubled now.

Several weeks have passed since their fleet annihilated the armada of the Arkan Union, but contrary to Commodore Rand’s predictions the victory was not achieved without sacrifice. Indeed, Rand himself paid the ultimate price, lost when the Arkan flagship rammed the bridge of his cruiser in a last-ditch attempt at retribution. Since then the situation has worsened steadily, with resistance to the Imperial Creed hardening across the Providence System. The Arkan cannot hope to win a war against even this tiny splinter of the Imperium’s might, yet they have refused to relent.

‘We were wrong to unleash the Resplendent on them,’ Father Deliverance says softly. ‘I was wrong.’

Five days ago he had commanded their Space Marine allies to strike at one of their enemy’s foremost bastions. It was calculated to be a brutal onslaught that would induce maximum shock and awe in their foe, ending the conflict before it escalated beyond control. Artificer Captain Czervantes opposed the order, but obeyed.

Subsequently fifty Assault Marines fell upon the elite of the Arkan Union from the sky, leaping from a squadron of Thunderhawks that easily evaded the fort’s
primitive sensors. The engagement lasted less than ten minutes and left thousands of Arkan soldiers dead and their ranking general captured. Not one of the Adeptus Astartes was lost.

Asenath once dreamed of seeing their magnificent allies wage war, but after the blood-drenched tales of the slaughter she thanks the God-Emperor she was not there to witness it.

‘The Resplendent are gone,’ Father Deliverance murmurs, looking up at her with tears in his eyes. ‘They have abandoned us.’

Asenath is stunned. Surely that cannot be true.

‘There is worse, my Vigilant Paladin,’ he continues. ‘The Arkan have not heeded our final warning. They have declared their defiance unto death and the Canoness Excruciant demands that we reply in kind.’ He pauses, his lips trembling. ‘She also requests that we petition the Ordo Hereticus for the assistance of a witch finder.’

‘But they are not heretics,’ Asenath protests, aghast.

‘Not in our eyes, perhaps, but make no mistake, a witch finder will see nothing but heresy here. The whole system will burn and all this will have been for nothing!’ Then, as she has been expecting, he places a hand on her shoulder and looks at her earnestly. ‘Only you can avert this catastrophe, my daughter. The prisoner the Resplendent seized is a man of great influence among the Arkan. Embrace your talent and turn his mind to the Imperial Creed. Make him our spokesman and perhaps enough of his kinsmen shall follow.’

Asenath shakes her head in dismay. Shortly after her recruitment to the crusade she had confessed the terrible things she learned – mastered – under Palatine Bhatori’s supervision. When Father Deliverance had absolved her it had felt like an iron spike pulled from her soul. This request feels like a betrayal.

‘You would make me a monster, Father.’

‘A saviour!’ His eyes brighten. ‘Salvation through suffering! In this aspect you shall be known as Sister Mercy, for you bear the gift of redemption.’ He strokes her cheek tenderly. ‘You have my word I will only ask this of you once, my daughter.’

Asenath closes her eyes and a glacial serenity blooms within her. Having no choice makes choosing easier.

‘I shall require needles,’ she says.

‘Emperor forgive me,’ Asenath whispered. She realised she was standing outside the palatine’s study. While her mind wandered her feet had found their way here.
*They remember too well to forget.*

The door before her was carved with a geometric abstraction of human musculature, rendered with obsessive care by Bhatori’s own hand. Staring at the contorted wood Asenath felt like an initiate again, riven with anxiety as she waited to face her punishment. The thought angered her, impelling her to rap on the door harder than she intended.

‘Enter,’ a voice rasped from within.

*She has no power over me anymore.* Asenath told herself as she obeyed.

The cramped gloom of the palatine’s eyrie was precisely as it had been in Asenath’s youth. Its walls were choked with shelves bearing heavy tomes and esoteric medical instruments. Sealed glass jars were squeezed among them, displaying anatomical specimens suspended in liquid. Rumour had it that one contained the brain of Sister Orlanda, whose malignant melancholy had driven her to suicide.

*Orlanda was my friend,* Asenath thought queasily, recalling the timid yet wild-eyed girl who had entered the sisterhood alongside her. *At least, she was the closest I had to one.*

A heavy desk dominated the far side of the room, overlooked by an arched window with red panes. Like the room, the woman behind the table appeared unchanged by the passing of time. She sat straight-backed and stiff, her gnarled hands spread across the desk’s velvet surface like dormant spiders, their long nails tipped with steel. Her cadaverous form was swathed in a scarlet robe embroidered with the helical candle of her order and hung with a variety of scalpels, tweezers and delicate hammers. A backswept wimple crowned her head, its flaps clasped beneath her chin, as if to bind her deeply seamed face.

Palatine Chirurgeon Akaishi Bhatori had looked like a mummified corpse thirty years ago and decay still hadn’t claimed her. White powder caked her skin and the severe bow of her lips was rouged black and pierced with studs of red glass. She was a native Vytarni, but the distinctive eyes of her Ikiryu bloodline had been replaced by ornate augmetics. The notched bronze rings framing the dark lenses whirred and clicked as they rotated to focus on Asenath.

‘Sister Hyades,’ the woman said, her desiccated voice amplified by the vocal implant in her throat, ‘you have kept me waiting.’

‘My apologies, revered palatine, but I could not abandon my patients. I am sure you understand.’ Bhatori offered no reply, so Asenath pressed on quickly. ‘May I express my gratitude for the beneficence you have shown us.’

‘The arrangements meet with your approval?’
‘They are exemplary, your grace.’
‘Preliminary examinations will commence tomorrow,’ Bhatori declared. ‘I shall supervise the proceedings personally.’
‘You honour us, palatine,’ Asenath said, masking her unease. ‘Your expertise is without equal.’
‘I have studied the reports you sent ahead, Sister. The aetiology of this affliction interests me. You believe it is xenos in origin?’
‘That is my best conjecture, yes.’
‘And you are certain that contagion is not a significant risk factor?’
‘The hazard is minimal,’ Asenath said, mirroring the palatine’s clinical tone. ‘Transmission may occur through exposure to the pathogens in the patients’ lesions, but standard precautionary measures are sufficient.’
‘Acceptable. It is unfortunate that you incinerated the deceased during your voyage. An exhaustive autopsy would advance our understanding of the infestation’s pathology. When can we expect another expiration to occur?’
‘Your pardon, palatine?’
‘An estimate will suffice.’
‘I had not considered the possibility,’ Asenath said, frowning. ‘It is my hope that we shall prevent any further deaths.’
‘That is highly improbable.’ Bhatori drummed her steel-tipped fingers on the desktop, seemingly lost in contemplation, then her optics clicked as she returned her attention to Asenath. ‘You disappoint me, Sister Hyades.’
‘Your grace?’
‘You persist in undermining your intellect with sentimentality.’
‘I am not a cog-hearted tech-priest, palatine,’ Asenath replied, growing flustered. ‘I believe—’
‘No, you are a consecrated hospitaller of the Adepta Sororitas. Your commission is the preservation of the God-Emperor’s subjects. This requires an acceptance of attrition.’ Bhatori clacked her nails together sharply, like scissors. ‘We cannot save everyone, Sister. To aspire to such a thing is arrogance. Existence is war, whether it is waged with a gun, a quill or a scalpel. There is always a cost.’
And that’s exactly how you like it, isn’t it? Asenath thought bitterly. Had she really imagined this confrontation could be avoided?
‘I—’
‘During your tenure at the Sacrasta Vermillion you displayed notable aptitude for the medicae craft,’ Bhatori continued. ‘I invested considerable resources in
your development, which you duly squandered to follow the path of a warrior.’

*To escape you!*  
‘I was gratified to learn that you have embraced your true calling, Sister Hyades, however your focus remains dismally narrow.’  
‘The beliefs of my new order differ from your own, palatine,’ Asenath replied, struggling to contain her anger. It would be folly to antagonise this pernicious woman when the Breachers’ lives depended on her goodwill. ‘But I stand corrected and ready to learn.’ Hating herself for it, she bowed her head in contrition.

‘Acceptable under probation,’ Bhatori judged. ‘You are dismissed, Sister.’  
Asenath hesitated. ‘With respect, I must ask after Breach Sergeant Feizt. He was not brought to the ward with my other charges.’  
‘His actions during your voyage were perplexing. I have assigned him to the Reformatorium pending a comprehensive evaluation.’  
*The Reformatorium...* Asenath blanched, remembering the pain-haunted cells in the Sacrasta’s basement.

‘These men are my responsibility,’ she protested.  
‘No longer, Sister,’ Bhatori said. ‘You are dismissed.’  
*Why did I bring them to her?* Asenath asked herself as she left the room.  
*Because she was dead,* the answer came back, *and I was expecting Palatine Shiloh to preside here.* But that made no sense. She had no reason to believe Bhatori might have died. *Because my reasons were stolen... unmade!* Asenath struggled to pin down the intuition, but it was like trying to catch the wind.

‘Violation,’ Asenath breathed, remembering Jonah’s warning. Nothing was sacrosanct anymore.

### III

Alone in his quarters, Jonah Tythe was hunched over a table, glaring at a blank page. It was one of the last in the book and it was *defiant*. His quill hovered fretfully over the paper, like a predator in search of prey, eager to make a kill, but bewildered by the abundance of choice. There were too many possible paths and permutations to travel, too many potential hopes and fears and loves and hates to unravel.

*And far too much at stake,* Jonah thought feverishly.

With a snarl of frustration he jabbed the quill into the palm of his other hand. The sharp tip drew blood, but all he felt was a dull throbbing. He stabbed again,
knowing it would make no difference and hating the certainty of that knowledge. Hating himself for needing to know…

‘It’s a soul curse, Three-Eyes,’ the squat, sub-human chirurgeon pronounces after she finishes her tests on Jonah’s nerveless flesh. ‘But only a curse ’coz you don’t got the brains to see it straight or the balls to use it.’

‘I see it straight enough,’ Jonah says, rising from the metal table in the heretic’s ramshackle laboratorium. The subterranean lair is crowded with the degenerates that worship Twistress Ymoreaux, many of them modified by her own hand. Every one of them is different, yet equally vile, marked by mutations that would damn them on the surface of their world. Even a backwater hovel like Haram will not tolerate such creatures openly, yet Jonah has travelled far to meet their mistress. After countless failures she might be his last hope for a cure.

‘How do I get rid of it?’ he demands.

‘You don’t. It’s down deep – much deeper than you think, moppet.’ Ymoreaux leers at him, running a long tongue over her shark-like teeth. ‘Your flesh feels dead ’coz you’re fightin’ the gift. You got to bend with the winds of the Fleshweaver’s fancy and let the blessings come, else you’ll snap like a roachrat in a drain-storm.’ She chuckles, drooling black spittle. ‘Or worse! There’s always worse to be had in this life, Three-Eyes.’

‘That’s not my name, mutant.’

‘Oh, but it is!’ the chirurgeon insists, stroking his arm with a withered claw. ‘It’s the only one what matters now. Once your true name finds you it owns you!’

‘Then there’s nothing you can do,’ Jonah says, squeezing a fist so tightly the nails draw blood, along with a whisper of blessed pain. Such impotent gestures have become a habit – an addiction, even. His other hand reaches for the pistol under his battered jacket, driven by an eagerness of its own. ‘You can’t help me.’

‘I can help you find yourself, moppet. Show you how to change your ways!’ Twistress Ymoreaux giggles again, as if at some private joke. ‘Maybe if you play nice I’ll even—’

Jonah puts a las-bolt through her jaws. As she falls and her followers scramble towards him in a gibbering swarm he opens fire, cutting them down like vermin. It feels good. Down here in this filthy techno-warren, beset by abominations and the ugly truth of himself, Jonah almost gives in to his ever-faithful rage. It has always been there, simmering under the skin of his thoughts like a hot coal buried in ashes. If he seizes it there will be a few moments of regret, then nothing but the sweet, red oblivion of wrath and one long payback for all the misery and
spiteful mystery the galaxy has thrown at him. It would be capitulation and conquest in one.

‘Burn it,’ he says, grinning as he executes the legless human slug clawing at his boots. ‘Burn it all!’ he shouts, putting down a rangy man with three melded faces that laugh, weep and snarl in concert.

As always it is his sister who saves him. An instant before he surrenders to the madness he sees Mina’s mournful visage and remembers himself. If the fury takes hold of him – really gets its teeth into his soul – it won’t ever let go. If that happens he won’t find her, because he will stop looking. He’ll forget her. That can’t happen.

So Jonah sweeps the ashes back over the hot coal in his soul and turns himself to ice once more.

‘I am nothing,’ he says, and saying it makes it so.

He purges the remaining mutants without another thought, firing and reloading and killing with the efficiency of a combat servitor running a liquidation protocol. He has done this many times before and will doubtless do it many times again. It has been a long and bloody road from the night-bound hell of Carceri to the mutant warrens of Haram – six years at least – but Jonah suspects his journey has scarcely begun.

When the purge is over he discovers Twistress Ymoreaux is somehow still alive. As he stands over her she begins to gurgle through the scorched ruin of her throat. It takes him a while to recognise the sound as laughter.

Dark drops of blood spattered onto the page. Within moments they were gone, devoured by the hungry parchment. Jonah snatched his hand away in disgust. The book had been leeching off his soul forever, but he was damned if he’d throw his lifeblood into the bargain.

_Damned_? Jonah chuckled grimly at the thought.

‘We’re a little past that, aren’t we,’ he confided to the heretical tome. Of course he was the heretic now, for it was his words that filled most of its pages – his impressions and intuitions that nourished it. The book’s esoteric preface had been the seed for everything that followed, both in his writing and his quest, for one fed the other, each hard-spun passage offering hints to some new avenue of investigation, which would invariably yield fresh horrors and darker insights to record and reflect upon. It was a self-fulfilling sacrifice to a story that went nowhere but down, dragging him a little further with every page completed and every step taken forwards.
‘The book is yours, Jonah Tythe,’ the silver-eyed, self-professed architect had decreed. ‘Finish it.’

Still brooding over her encounter with the palatine, Asenath made her way down to her quarters, then pressed on to the next room along the corridor. For the second time that night she found herself hesitating outside a door.

_I need to talk to him_, she decided.

It was almost a minute before Jonah answered her tentative knocking. His face was slack and his eyes glassy, as if his attention were fixed on something far away. For a moment Asenath feared he wouldn’t recognise her, then his gaze sharpened.

‘Sister Asenath,’ he mumbled. ‘You look troubled.’

‘How often does it happen?’ she asked without preamble. ‘The violation?’

Jonah shook his head wearily and stepped aside. ‘You’d better come in.’

The room stank of something stronger than his habitual lho-sticks. Obscura perhaps? The lingering smoke made Asenath dizzy, as if the thoughts swirling through her head weren’t disorientating enough.

_Little wonder he’s losing himself_, she judged.

Her eyes were drawn to the glow of the lantern on his desk. A large book lay beside it, spread open to its last few pages. She glimpsed exquisitely formed characters that trailed off halfway down a page, but Jonah closed it before she could read the words. The book’s blue leather binding was engraved with twin forks of silver lightning, the right a little above the left. It was a simple glyph, yet somehow replete with… what? Significance? Potential?

‘You write?’ Asenath asked, indicating the paraphernalia beside the tome. Like herself, he evidently favoured quill and ink.

‘I told you I was here about a book,’ Jonah said, stowing the tome in a drawer.

‘As to your other question, I don’t have an answer for you, Sister. How often does it happen? _Too often_, I’d say, but that’s only a guess. We can feel the changes, but we can’t keep track of them.’

‘Because we change with them,’ Asenath said, intuitively following his logic through. ‘They change us.’

‘You’ve just had a bad one, haven’t you?’ Jonah sighed and sank into his chair like an old man. ‘But it’s already slipping away from you.’

‘Why is it happening?’

They had talked often during the remainder of the voyage, even gravitated towards a cautious friendship, but she had always avoided this subject. The
possibility that space and time – reality itself – might be ailing had been too much to accept. How could such an affliction be treated?

‘Why?’ she urged. ‘What is the cause?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe somebody’s pulling our strings to make us dance, or just pulling them apart to see what happens.’ Jonah threw her a sour grin. ‘Or maybe it’s all just unravelling by itself and there’s no point to any of it.’

‘But you don’t really believe that.’

‘No,’ Jonah agreed, suddenly deadly serious. ‘No, I don’t. I think the root of it is here and your bloody Exegessor is up to his neck in it.’

‘Olber Vedas is a devout man and a transcendent thinker,’ Asenath protested, startled by the intensity of her conviction. ‘Many regard him as a saint.’

‘Let’s just say I’ve seen him in a different light. Everybody can fall, Sister. And the higher up they start, the harder they’ll hit the ground – maybe even hard enough to crack it right open.’ Jonah rubbed at the pale scar between his eyes and she noticed his hand was covered with dried blood. ‘Anyway, I’ll find out tomorrow.’

‘You intend to visit the Lux Novus,’ Asenath guessed. ‘Is that wise?’

‘It’s why I’m here.’

‘Wait a few days,’ she suggested. ‘I will come with you, but I cannot leave until I am certain my charges are safe.’

‘You actually give a damn about those poor bastards, don’t you?’

‘Does that surprise you, priest?’

‘Actually I’m surprised it doesn’t.’ Jonah regarded her quizzically for a moment then rose. ‘Wait a moment, please.’ He shuffled to the trunk at the foot of his bed and heaved out a metal crate embossed with an angular double-headed eagle.

‘I haven’t always worked alone,’ he said, setting the crate down on his desk. ‘This is Astra Militarum issue.’ He slid a latch free and the front swung open, revealing a sturdy vox-caster. ‘I’ll hook it up here and leave it running as a relay transmitter. The range should be good for half the Ring, maybe more unless a storm hits, in which case all bets are off.’

Two compact headsets were clipped to the comms device. He handed one to Asenath and pocketed the other. She didn’t question how he had come by Militarum-grade equipment. Frankly it was the least of this man’s mysteries.

‘Show me,’ she said. Swiftly he ran through the headset’s operations, his manner more like a soldier’s than a priest’s.

_You have been many things, Jonah Tythe_, Asenath guessed, _none of them real._ Despite their many talks she still had no idea who he really was. _Or what?_
‘Check in every six hours from dawn,’ Jonah finished. ‘Or if something comes up, but keep it discreet.’
‘I understand.’
‘Good, then we’ll talk around noon, Sister.’
‘You won’t wait, will you,’ Asenath pressed. ‘You are intent on confronting the Exegessor tomorrow.’
‘I am,’ he admitted. ‘It’s been a long time coming.’
‘Then I shall pray this is not where our roads part in perpetuity, Jonah.’
‘They all wind up in the same place anyway, Asenath,’ he answered, then smiled. For once it looked sincere. ‘But what do I know about anything?’

Breacher Rem Rynfeld lay on his back, drenched in sweat and coursing with dull pain as he listened to the night. The fitful sleep of his comrades filled the long room with a dirge of coughs, snores and moans, almost drowning out the pervasive creaks and sputters of the old building itself, but that wasn’t what he was listening for.

‘Gone,’ he muttered in wonder. Though the flies had retreated during the last leg of their voyage he’d still heard their sly buzzing, but here… nothing. He grinned. He’d held on through his suffering, afraid the vermin would take him like they took Glicke, but now he could let go. Finally.

‘Gone,’ Rynfeld repeated with a sickly smile. He glanced at the lieutenant, who sat in a chair at the far end of the ward, his head slumped over his chest in slumber. Reiss and the commissar had taken turns to keep watch, though they’d said nothing to the others. Didn’t they know it was over? Couldn’t they hear it?

Rynfeld turned as the ward’s double doors whispered open. A tall, cadaverously thin woman was silhouetted in the entrance, her hands clasped before her, the bulbous lenses covering her eyes glowing softly through the gloom. He froze as she entered and walked along the aisle, her footsteps clacking sharply, as though she wore metal-shod shoes, yet nobody stirred. She stopped beside each bunk and appraised its occupant before moving on, just as sweet Sister Darkstar used to do, but though she wore a hospitaller’s red garb, this woman was completely different. To Rynfeld’s fever-heightened senses there was no mistaking her.

‘Breath Stealer,’ he hissed, too weak to manage more than a rasp. With a shudder he closed his eyes and waited, quite certain who she had come for.
Last night, for the first time since it began, there was a twist in my recurrent nightmare. As I climbed the spiral path into nowhere my pursuer called out to me, uttering my name like a loving curse. Shocked, I spun round and lost my footing on the glassy road. Tumbling flat on my back, I finally saw my stalker – a tall, spindly figure woven from shadows. Though it was entirely black, like a silhouette against the white void, it was unmistakably a woman, her wild mane swirling behind her like a tenebrous nebula as she strode towards me on pointed, stilt-like legs. Her arms hung loosely by her waist, the fingers of her splayed hands tipped with long needles that dripped darkness. With every step she took her form flickered, as though it were stuttering through time.

‘Now you see me, little Sister, oh how you do!’ she crooned, her voice like fingernails raking blood from metal. ‘And what’s seen won’t un-see herself, oh no!’

With a moan of horror, I scrambled to my feet and fled from the daemon, for it could surely be nothing else, but no matter how I pushed myself I knew I would never widen the distance between us, for what’s lost here can never be reclaimed.

After an immeasurable time I glanced round, praying my pursuer had retreated into her former invisibility, but even that mercy was denied me. As she promised, a blasphemy seen cannot be unseen or go unsung! Doubtless I shall see her
again every night henceforth, and in the seeing, grant her greater substance. And in return I’ll gift you a sliver of STYLE, grey sister.

Reaching the Koronatus Ring has brought me closer to my redemption, but like some malign counterweight, my damnation has closed in on me in turn. Whatever the God-Emperor requires of me must be achieved soon, lest my darkness outruns my light. But where’s the end in sight? And what price the victory?

But there is something else I must disclose, my lady. I have never spoken to you of Palatine Chirurgeon Bhatori, the Bronze Candle’s mistress, nor have I the inclination to dwell on her now, but I suspect that seeing her again was responsible for my heightened nightmare. The palatine undoubtedly believes herself to be a loyal servant of the Throne and her ability in her chosen field is unparalleled, yet I loathe her with every fibre of my being. It was she who sowed the seeds of my darkness, and quite possibly my damnation. Emancipation! Should something untoward befall me I urge you to look to her first, for it is with Palatine Bhatori that I shall commence my investigations.

Asenath closed her journal. If she intended to see her plan through she could tarry no longer. It would be First Dawn soon, which should give her a few hours of freedom while the palatine rested. If Bhatori had altered her routines things could become very complicated.

‘I am not wrong,’ Asenath assured herself. ‘The crone was never one for change.’

She stepped out into the corridor and glanced at Jonah’s door. He would be long gone by now, probably well on his way to Spire Veritas, where the Lux Novus was situated. Could the schola’s provost truly be involved – instrumental even – in Vytarn’s creeping sickness? She couldn’t recall ever having seen the Theologus Exegessor, though her memories of the schola were vivid. Like all children of the Candleworld who showed promise, she had been enrolled in the Lux Novus at the age of seven. The following three years had been defined by seemingly endless study, prayer and testing to weed out the merely competent from the truly exceptional. They had been hard years, but also inspiring, inculcating her with a profound faith in humanity’s sacred destiny. It seemed impossible that such a place, or the man who charted its course, could harbour corruption.

Asenath put the subject from her mind. She had more immediate concerns to attend to. The dream had made it clear she was running out of time.
Straightening her back, she got moving. As she expected, the hospital wasn’t entirely quiet even now, but the few staff she passed either offered polite greetings or ignored her, no doubt assuming she was en route to her patients. She might be a stranger here, but she was still a senior hospitaller and an air of authority was the most effective cloak in such a situation. What surprised her was how well she remembered all the twists and turns of the labyrinthine building. And yet, upon reflection, it wasn’t really surprising at all.

‘It was my prison for five years,’ Asenath murmured, loathing the incessant red and white chequered tiles and bronze fixtures that defined the Sacrasta. Nothing had progressed here except decay, which was everywhere, lurking in cracks and patches of dampness and the black mould thriving between the tiles. In some places the sickly sweet stench of rot was almost overpowering, as though the canker within the walls was on the cusp of bursting through. Blossoming.

_This wasn’t how it was meant to be_, Asenath thought, but the intuition had no weight behind it. Whatever justified it had been stripped from her memories.

‘Don’t question it now,’ she told herself. ‘Stay focused.’

When she reached the ground floor her ruse became more vexing because her path lay towards the rear of the complex, away from the Breachers’ ward, but she decided against furtiveness and continued boldly until she found the stairwell to the basement level. If she was spotted here she could offer no credible explanation for her presence so she hurried down the steps and through the swinging doors below. The corridor beyond terminated at a T-junction where a plaque indicated that the left passage led to the Mortifactorum, where the dead were tended to, and the right to the Reformatorium.

‘The two are situated to serve each other,’ Asenath observed morbidly as she took the right fork. Only the palatine’s most favoured acolytes were permitted down here and she suspected their number had dwindled rather than grown over the years, for Bhatori was jealous of her research.

The passage terminated at a plasteel hatch embossed with a helical candle. There were no handles or locks in sight, but a glass sensor plate was embedded in the icon’s flame. Holding her breath, Asenath placed her palm on the glass. If her access had been revoked she would get no further here. Indeed, a craven part of her hoped it might prove to be so.

The sensor lit up and chimed its approval. With a hiss of pneumatic servos the hatch slid aside, revealing a large circular chamber. Seven further doors were set into its walls, each bearing a bas-relief depicting one of the Virtues Incarnate. Banks of monitoring equipment were mounted beside each door, their screens
constantly updating as they tracked the status of the patients in the cells beyond. A solitary figure flitted between them like a crimson-robed phantom, stopping briefly at each to assess the data and make minor adjustments before moving on to the next. Asenath knew the overseer would repeat the cycle indefinitely, only pausing when its internal sensors urged it to recharge its powercells or ingest nutrients from the feeder sockets by the entrance.

‘Hello, Angelique,’ she whispered, her revulsion undimmed by time. Naturally the demi-sentient slave paid her no attention. Anything that fell outside the narrow directives etched into its lobotomised brain was invisible to it.

The medicae servitor had been here thirty years ago, but Palatine Bhatori had hinted it was much older, perhaps even dating back to the Sacrasta’s construction. Its form was that of a tall, unnaturally slender woman, but there was no telling what really lay under its flowing red robes or the sculpted porcelain mask that served as its face. Unlike other servitors Asenath had encountered over the years, Angelique moved with unsettling grace, seeming to glide across the floor like a robed snake. Its sinuous arms were sheathed in leather sleeves that merged seamlessly into gloves, revealing nothing of the flesh beneath.

‘It is only a puppet,’ she told herself and stepped inside.

*But who is its true master, Sister?*

The hatch slid shut behind her with the finality of a bad bargain sealed. Reluctantly Asenath’s gaze settled on the real nightmare here. Like the chamber’s custodian, the Tabula Rasa had not changed at all.

*Why would it? It is perfectly itself and always was.*

The massive surgical table was mounted on a raised platform at the centre of the chamber, directly beneath a cluster of saucer-like lights. Its ornate metal frame bristled with multijointed servo-arms fitted with blades, drills and needle-like probes, all promising more pain than succour. Several of the implements were embedded in the belly of the misshapen giant who lay spread-eagled upon the table.

‘Feizt,’ Asenath breathed, approaching the dais.

Though the Guardsman was unconscious his limbs were restrained with manacles that held him rigid. A cage-like cap enclosed his head, its front fitted with clamps to hold his jaws open for the feeder pipes inserted in his throat. More tubes and wires snaked from his arms to a chattering cogitator lectern beside the table and an array of life-support devices. Tripod-mounted monitors encircled him, pulsing, chiming and whirring as they tracked his vital signs, but
Asenath didn’t need them to tell that Feizt’s condition was grave. The bandages had been removed from his midriff, revealing his wound, which had festered grievously since she last cleaned it. Pus oozed at its edges and the flesh around it crawled with blisters and lesions.

‘You will be at peace soon, brother,’ Asenath said, feeling more relief than sadness. Even if the breach sergeant had survived, his wits would almost certainly have been addled. For a man like Toland Feizt such a fate would be worse than death. Nevertheless, that didn’t excuse Bhatori’s actions.

As Asenath expected, the palatine had been unable to resist such a unique subject. Evidently she had laboured through the night on her new acquisition, her industry driven by curiosity rather than compassion. To Akaishi Bhatori this man was just a wrapper of flesh for the Razorblight’s riddle – another enigma to be prodded, probed, dissected and discarded, like all the others that had lain upon this table…

‘The potentialities of life are delineated by the pre-eminent injunctions of death,’ Palatine Bhatori expounds to her favoured pupils. ‘To fully apprehend and conserve the former, one must recognise, respect and regulate the latter. Regrettably, our capacity to attain such proficiency is frequently obfuscated by a predilection towards sentiment.’

The palatine pauses, her dark lenses roving over the initiates gathered around the Tabula Rasa. Her gaze lingers on Sister Orlanda, who has secretly confessed her doubts to Asenath. Standing beside her, Asenath senses her friend’s terror and wills her to remain calm.

‘It is essential that we resist this impulse,’ Bhatori finally continues, ‘for it is both erroneous and counterproductive. Is this understood?’

‘Yes, mistress,’ Asenath intones with the others. She is thirteen years old and though she already hates the palatine she still believes the work they are doing here serves mankind. How could it be otherwise?

Her gaze falls upon the volunteer lying on the table. The man has been restrained, but his round face is placid, confirming his trust in the sisterhood. Asenath has no idea who he is or where he comes from, but she has seen enough of her mistress’ work to know he will not leave this place alive. The thought makes her sad, but she understands his sacrifice will win him a place by the God-Emperor’s side.

‘The most congenital manifestation of sentiment is the hesitation it engenders over the question of pain,’ Bhatori proclaims. ‘This is irrational, for pain is
merely a reflexive response to adverse physical stimulus – a contrivance of the senses. While the feedback it provokes is frequently dynamic, it plays a minimal role in the actual process of expiration. Indeed, it is not uncommon for pain to persist in extremity without inducing death.’ Bhatori selects a gleaming needle from the array pinned to her robe. ‘I shall demonstrate.’

Asenath closed her eyes, remembering the volunteer’s shrieks, and worse, the look of betrayal on his face when the palatine commenced her work.

‘To heal without qualms we must harden ourselves to the pandemonium of the senses,’ she quoted hollowly. ‘Pain is only an illusion.’

Later she had been required to put Bhatori’s techniques into practice herself, not once, but many times, diligently inducing suffering and inuring herself to its distractions. While her fellow initiate, Orlanda, had faltered, Asenath had excelled. Decades later, long after she hoped those sins were behind her, she had excelled at them again in Father Deliverance’s service. Over and over…

Because you tasted the truth of it, her inner voice suggested archly. Sensation is all there is, perfecting it all that matters.

‘That’s not true.’

You can’t lie to yourself, little sinner! I’ll see right through us if you do!

Laughter reverberated around the chamber, mocking and malevolent, yet unmistakably affectionate. Asenath glanced about furiously, but other than Feizt and Angelique she was alone.

Angelique...

She stared at the red-robed servitor. It stood motionless, its blank gaze directed towards her. Like its form, the slave’s porcelain face was feminine in aspect, its features almost regal, like the purloined death mask of a slain heroine. Its eyes were smooth ovals, the mask’s surface unmarred by obvious sensors.

‘You can see me,’ Asenath whispered. It was several seconds before she realised the laughter had stopped. ‘Can you understand me?’

Angelique raised its right arm to point at the cell door beside it. The bas-relief on the hatch depicted the Harrowed Artisan of Humilitas, the Virtue Incarnate of those who strove without recognition or the desire for it.

The Artisan’s six atrophied arms were extended symmetrically to either side, forming a circle about its wasted torso. Each hand held a different tool that was flawed in some small but crucial way that would blemish its creations. Its noble face was framed by lank hair and hollowed out by starvation and failure, yet it still wore the ghost of a smile.
‘What do you want from me?’ Asenath asked Angelique, though the answer was obvious. ‘No.’ She shook her head, remembering the twisted creatures the palatine had kept in the cells. Her significant subjects… ‘I don’t want to see her work.’

_Oh, but you do!

Angelique cocked its head as if it heard her thoughts.
__Didn’t you come down here for answers, Sister? Where else would you look?__

Sliding Tristesse from her bag, Asenath approached the servitor warily. It didn’t react to the weapon, indeed it paid no heed to her at all as she crossed the room, its gaze frozen on the space she had vacated.

‘Why this one?’ Asenath murmured as she reached the door. An observation window was set above the bas-relief, its closed shutter mounted with an ostentatious scroll. The words on the document were in High Gothic, their phraseology as convoluted as their characters, but their meaning was clear enough.

‘A witch,’ Asenath hissed, recoiling from the door in revulsion.

_Which kind?_

‘There are no witches on the Candleworld.’

None they told you about, at least!

Angelique had turned its blank eyes upon her again, mutely expectant.

__What did the Prophet say about truth, Sister?__

Reluctantly, Asenath reached out and grasped the lever of the shutter. It was cold to the touch.

‘Truth is our first and everlasting light,’ she intoned and slid the shutter aside.

**II**

First Dawn broke over the Perihelion as Jonah reached the far side of Clementia Bridge. The ruddy light of Damnation spilled over the mountain like nebulous blood, awakening the landscape into a hellish abstraction.

Jonah stopped and squinted at the bloated red giant looming over the distant summit. It wasn’t the ugliest sun he’d ever seen, but there was a slothful ire about it he didn’t like at all, as if it just needed one more shove to go nova and take the whole system along with it.

‘Have you been waiting for me?’ he challenged the dying sun.

He’d lost track of all the worlds he’d walked upon, and the years spent roaming the void between them under myriad names and guises. Eventually he’d also
stopped counting the corpses left in his wake, some of them intentional, most not. There was a time when the death toll had troubled him, then tormented him, but he’d learnt to let it go and keep his eyes on the road ahead. What else was there?

‘You could just walk away,’ the officer who has blocked Jonah’s path suggests reasonably.

‘What?’ Jonah says, taken aback.

‘I said walk away!’ the man snarls, his manner changing abruptly, as if a switch in his head has been flipped. ‘This area is off-limits, citizen!’

The officer’s comrades raise their bone-stocked autorifles to cover Jonah. There are ten of them standing in the dark, windswept street outside his destination. All are big, heavily bearded men in white greatcoats and fur-trimmed hats with long earflaps. Despite their uniforms Jonah can tell they are little more than privileged thugs without a dagger’s-breadth of true steel in their spines. The security forces of this miserable world are more accustomed to keeping their own people in line than confronting foes that might fight back, let alone the kind that lurks in the building these men are guarding.

‘I am not a citizen of this planet,’ Jonah says levelly. ‘I am an authorised agent of the Holy Inquisition, tasked with purging the heresy in there!’ He jabs a finger at the building. ‘You will consider yourselves under my command.’

It is a lazy lie and he doesn’t even bother to tell it well, or show them the forged Inquisitorial seal he carries. He is too tired and far too tense to waste energy on these fools when he can smell the fear on them. All they want is someone to make it go away – to make the thing inside the building go away.

‘Inquisition,’ the officer mumbles, hope vying with even greater terror on his face. ‘I meant no disrespect, lord!’

‘When did it happen?’ Jonah snaps.

‘The disturbance was reported a few hours ago, lord. Sergeant Goran’s squad got here first. They… they went inside. We heard the screams as we arrived… and something else. Something—’

‘Nobody has entered since then?’

‘No, lord.’

‘See that nobody does.’

‘Yes, lord!’ The relief in the officer’s eyes would be amusing under other circumstances.

Tacitly dismissing the frightened guards, Jonah appraises the building. The fish
processing plant is a hulking, boxy monstrosity thrown together from corrugated plasteel sheets, much like the other structures in this city’s industrial quarter, yet there is a watchfulness about it that is all its own. Though he has never seen the place before he recognises it immediately, for he has already described it with febrile clarity, setting its likeness down in the tome, along with details of the world destined to spawn it.

That was over two years ago. He has been holed up in the slums of this icebound city that calls itself a hive almost as long, waiting for it to give birth to his prophecy, yet now the moment has come he hesitates. Though he has foreseen and borne witness to countless nightmares since he escaped Sarastus, this feels different.

‘You know I’m coming, don’t you?’ he whispers to the thing within.
‘My lord?’ the officer asks.
‘Don’t follow me,’ Jonah orders. It is probably the most superfluous command he has ever given.

He draws his baroque Elegy pistol and flips the safety off. Though the antique weapon carries only a single cartridge it packs more punch than a conventional sidearm, and the bullet in its chamber is more formidable than the gun itself. The large calibre cartridge is one of six that Jonah has forged and blessed personally, imbuing them with every iota of his contempt for all things strange and twisted. Its propellant is laced with granules of ground glass from one of the mirror fragments he salvaged on the first night of his everlasting quest. Over the years he has learnt the value of those precious shards well.

Without another word he pushes past the guards and slides the concertinaed metal door of the processing plant open. The darkness beyond is almost complete, but he allows himself no further hesitation.

‘What else is there?’ he asks and strides forwards.

‘Well met, priest!’

Surprised, Jonah swung round, his eyes still dazzled by Damnation’s dour glare. He had been staring into it too long, though he’d stopped actually seeing it some time ago. During his unwelcome reverie a vehicle had pulled up alongside him on the perimeter road.

As his vision cleared he made out a compact buggy, its engine chugging as it idled. The open-topped chassis was mounted on bulbous, heavy-treaded wheels that looked capable of handling rough terrain, probably even the steep roads that wound up the spires. Its blue patina was battered and spattered with dirt, yet the
symbol on its bonnet gleamed as if it had just been polished – a pyramidal candle inset with a vertical eye.

‘My apologies, I did not intend to startle you,’ the woman behind the vehicle’s wheel said, not sounding contrite at all. Her voice had a gravelly quality, the accent unusually guttural. ‘It is uncommon to see anyone outside at First Dawn, especially on the Via Korona. The city folk think it unlucky.’

‘Yet you are here,’ Jonah pointed out.

‘I am an uncommon woman.’ She snorted dismissively. ‘And I have no patience for superstitions when true mysteries abound.’

Her brusque tone suggested she had little patience for civility either. Like her manner, her square-jawed face and blunt features projected a forthrightness that bordered on belligerence, yet there was a spark of humour in her lively blue eyes. She wore her white hair in a bob, shorn close at the ears, one of which was fitted with a sensor-studded attachment. Her argent-trimmed azure robes were almost as grimy as her vehicle, yet there was a brash authority about her.

‘You are with the Silver Candle, Sister?’ Jonah asked formally.

‘For my sins, priest!’ she confirmed. ‘I am fated to chase after an enigma that will run rings around me long after my mortal shell has gone to the worms.’ Seeing Jonah’s surprise at her irreverence she grinned fiercely. ‘Oh, make no mistake, I could ask for no greater calling in this life. I do the God-Emperor’s work.’

‘As you say, Sister.’

She swung open the passenger door. ‘Get in.’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘Because it is a long walk to Spire Veritas, Preacher Tythe!’

She was called Hagalaz. Jonah didn’t know if it was her first or second name and she had offered nothing more, but it was obvious she was no ordinary Sister Dialogus and their meeting had been no accident. Once they were under way he’d braced himself for questions, yet after her cursory introduction and offer to take him to Spire Veritas she appeared to lose interest in him altogether. Humming tunelessly she sped along the narrow mountain road, heedless of the sheer drop to their right.

*What’s your game, woman?* Jonah mused. He wasn’t particularly surprised she had known his name and destination. He’d given both to the port authorities at Rosetta, and then again to the Celestians on the *Blood of Demeter* so it was inevitable that word would reach the Ring’s custodians. Given the ship’s eventful
voyage it was also inevitable that questions would be raised. No, what baffled him was that Sister Hagalaz wasn’t actually asking them.

‘Why Damnation?’ Jonah said on impulse. ‘This is a holy world. Why give one of its suns such a name?’

‘Humility,’ Hagalaz answered. ‘To remind us that knowledge is a knife that cuts both ways.’

‘Yet your sect pursues it anyway.’

‘We must! The dark sun also reminds us what awaits if we fail.’

‘Fail?’

‘To find an answer, priest.’

‘To what?’

‘So many questions!’ she exclaimed, slapping her hands on the wheel for emphasis. Jonah couldn’t tell if this was meant as a literal answer or a plea for silence, but he decided against agitating her further. She was driving too fast for needless distractions. It seemed inconceivable that his hunt might end in a sixteen-hundred-foot plunge into the ocean, but he wouldn’t put it past his luck. Or fate. Besides he was too weary to press his eccentric companion. He’d worked through the night, fighting to finish the book before the coming confrontation, yet his labours had rewarded him with a scant three paragraphs, all of them ambiguous.

‘Wait,’ Asenath had cautioned, and he’d known she was right. He wasn’t ready. Surreptitiously he inspected his left hand. As expected, his self-inflicted gashes were already fading. By noon they would be gone without a trace, like the countless other wounds he’d taken over the years. His curse only allowed him one scar – at least only one that was visible.

‘Wait.’

‘I can’t,’ he said sadly.

‘What else is there?’ Jonah asks as the expectant darkness swallows him yet again.

The odour of not-so-fresh fish washes over him, mingled with the reek of much fresher blood. It was cold in the streets, but inside the processing plant it is so bitter his nerveless flesh actually feels it, maybe because it is an unnatural cold. His instincts scream at him to abandon this revelation and find another way forwards.

‘I can’t,’ he says. It is a denial and an affirmation in one.

With trembling fingers, he pulls a leather pouch from his greatcoat and draws
out a shard of coloured glass. Only five of the mirror fragments remain. This one glows a lambent yellow in his palm. The urge to crush it and savour its vile, vital essence is almost overpowering, but he refuses.

‘Only if I must, Mina,’ he promises his twin sister, closing his fist carefully around the jagged shard. With his other thumb he activates the light on his long-barrelled pistol and plays its beam across the darkness. The interior of the plant is a single cavernous hall lined with long metal tables bearing fish of various shapes and sizes. Larger ones hang from the ceiling on hooks, sliced open to vent their innards into iron skillets. But it is not the violence done to fish that makes Jonah’s gorge rise.

There are bodies everywhere, torn apart and scattered about with wild abandon. Many of the fishery workers are sprawled across the tables among the sea creatures they were filleting only hours before. Some dangle from the roof, caught in the rafters where their butcher hurled them like blood-filled bags. A few still clutch cleavers or knives, the makeshift weapons frozen into their hands. Among the slaughtered labourers are the remnants of Sergeant Goran’s Ironspine Hussars, their white greatcoats shredded and dyed red. Everything is covered in a rime of frost and the blood has frozen solid, forming crimson icicles along the tables and rafters.

‘Sacred Throne,’ Jonah breathes, his cynicism eclipsed by horror. There must be over a hundred bodies here, none of them anywhere near the exit. ‘Why didn’t you try to run?’

As if in reply, there is a snigger from the darkness at the other end of the hall, too far away for his light to penetrate.

‘Who’s there?’ Jonah calls. More giggling, curdled by malice and madness into something fouler than any threat.

Jonah advances cautiously until his beam finds a man crouched behind an overturned table. The stranger looks up sharply, blinking into the light. There are three concentric circles carved into his scraggy face, radiating from an invisible point between his eyes. Unlike the other wounds made in this hellish place they are still bleeding.

‘Is it you, brothers?’ the man pleads. ‘Did you hear our cry?’ His scrawny frame is naked save for a few torn rags, but Jonah has seen enough of this planet’s downtrodden to recognise him as a bonded labourer, though a truer word would be slave.

‘What happened here?’ Jonah asks, stopping a few paces from the survivor.

‘Freedom, brother.’ The man sighs wistfully as his eyes adjust to the light and
lock on to Jonah. ‘It isn’t you.’

‘Maybe it is,’ Jonah says, dropping to his haunches so their eyes are level. ‘I’m here because I heard the cry. What is your name... brother?’

‘Me?’ The man regards him uncertainly for a moment then grins. ‘I am Verloc. I am a fighter!’

‘A freedom fighter?’ Jonah guesses.

‘Of course, brother!’ Verloc nods vigorously. ‘There are changes coming. I have seen them – in here!’ He taps his forehead. ‘And I have seen the liberators also, but they are still far away. Too far to sight us.’

‘Who are they, Brother Verloc? Did they do this?’

‘The liberators?’ The survivor looks surprised, as if the notion is absurd. ‘No, brother, we did this. All of us together – to signal the liberators!’ Verloc lowers his voice, as if to confide a secret. ‘The others didn’t know, of course. I had to show them. Make them see their own fire!’ He runs a finger through the bloody whorls on his face. ‘She showed me how. The Ruzhalka.’

Jonah’s grip tightens on the mirror shard. Ruzhalka... He has never heard the name, but he knows the feelings it evokes all too well. Black hate and red rage.

‘Is this Ruzhalka a liberator?’ The name tastes like seared meat on his tongue.

‘No, the Ruzhalka is a fish, brother,’ Verloc replies.

Jonah stares at the man. Whatever he expected to hear, it is not this.

Verloc giggles at his expression. ‘Not a common fish! She swims in bigger, deeper oceans than ours and she could swallow a varwhale whole.’ His eyes narrow to feral slits. ‘Would you like to see her, brother?’

‘What is she?’

The survivor’s grin widens. And keeps on widening...

Jonah wrenched himself out of the past so violently he almost surged out of his seat. His breath coming in harsh gasps, he stared at the rocky terrain speeding past him.

‘A sour dream,’ the woman sitting beside him in the buggy observed.

‘I’ve had better, Sister,’ he croaked through parched lips. ‘How long was I out?’

‘Almost two hours,’ Hagalaz replied. ‘Second Dawn has broken.’

Blearily Jonah realised it was true. Damnation’s sanguine haze had receded, overwhelmed by the radiance of Vytarn’s vigorous second sun. With Salvation ascendant the rugged landscape was strikingly beautiful. Out to sea, beyond the curve of the road, he saw a slender mountain jutting from the waves like a stone spear. The Spire’s dark form narrowed sharply towards its pinnacle, where
something glimmered in the golden light – probably a dome of some kind. A bridge swept from the mountain’s foothills towards the mainland, its marble-clad length suspended on titanic pylons spiked with lightning rods.

‘That is Veritas, the Tornspire,’ Hagalaz said with uncharacteristic reverence. ‘We will reach the Bridge of Truth soon.’

*I underestimated the distance*, Jonah gauged. Going anticlockwise on the perimeter road, Veritas was only the second spire along from the hospital’s bastion, but on foot he wouldn’t have reached it before nightfall.

‘You know I am bound for the Lux Novus, Sister,’ he challenged cautiously. ‘I do.’

‘Do you plan on coming with me?’

‘Not this day, Preacher Tythe.’

Jonah hesitated a moment. ‘Will you try to stop me?’

‘No.’

*Then what’s this all about, Sister?* Jonah wondered. He got his answer as they approached the massive ramp that fed the bridge.

‘I will not stand in your path, priest,’ Hagalaz said, braking to a halt at the foot of the ramp, ‘but my esteemed Sisters most certainly will.’

About thirty feet past its mouth the bridge was sealed by a wall of interlocking iron panels. All were embossed with the angular candle of the sect’s militant order and fortified with prayer scrolls and holy icons. Gun turrets reinforced the barrier at regular intervals and Battle Sisters in slate-grey armour walked its ramparts, their weapons held ready. An ornate tank sat at the crest of the ramp, the missile array on its hull directed over the wall.

‘Do you see it?’ Hagalaz asked intently.

‘They’re keeping something inside,’ Jonah replied, grasping the crux of her question immediately. ‘Why?’

‘There was an… occurrence… at the Lux Novus. A profoundly blasphemous one.’ A note of anger crept into her voice. ‘We fear the entire spire may be compromised.’

‘What happened?’ Jonah asked, gauging the defences with a practised eye. How many times, in how many tainted places, had he asked that same dismal question?

‘I was hoping you might be able to tell me, Preacher Tythe.’

‘I?’ Jonah turned to her. ‘I’ve only just arrived.’

‘To meet with the Theologus Exegessor?’

‘Yes, I am here at his invitation, Sister.’
‘Which you claim to have received by astropathic communication nine standard months ago, correct?’

‘As I informed the space port authorities,’ Jonah frowned. Had his enemy lured him into a more mundane trap than he’d anticipated? Would this end with his execution at the hands of Vytarn’s sisterhood? ‘Were the identification canticles I presented inadequate, Sister?’

‘On the contrary, they were undoubtedly genuine, but I have two concerns,’ Hagalaz declared. ‘Firstly, there are no astropaths on the Candleworld.’

Jonah nodded, trying to buy time to think. He didn’t plan on telling her the truth about the message he’d received, or the nature of the creature that had relayed it.

‘Suffer not the psyker,’ he quoted piously. *Even sanctioned, useful ones.* It was a common attitude among the more zealous branches of the Ecclesiarchy, but he hadn’t expected it from the Last Candle, which was about as radical as they came.

‘It is not a question of *sufferance*, priest,’ Hagalaz said. ‘We understand the value of astropaths.’

‘Then why—’

‘My second concern is more perplexing still,’ she cut in. ‘Virtually all the schola’s staff and students were lost in the catastrophe. The Theologus Exegessor was among them.’

‘I…’

‘The event occurred over two years ago, Preacher Tythe.’ Her blue eyes bored into him.

‘That’s… not possible.’

‘I see you grasp the conundrum.’

Jonah wasn’t listening. He had imagined countless potential outcomes to his hunt, but every one of them ended with his quarry, their confrontation as inevitable as its resolution was unknowable. If Vedas was dead it had all been for nothing.

*How will I find you, Mina?* Jonah closed his eyes, trying to think.

‘Preacher Tythe?’ Hagalaz asked, sounding far away.

Jonah’s nostrils twitched as the reek of fish swept in on the ocean wind, and just behind it, the scent of blood.

‘Do you smell that?’ he asked.

‘Smell what, priest?’

‘It’s a lie,’ Jonah said with cold conviction. Remembering, he clenched his fist.
The mirror shard in his hand shatters into a multitude of smaller fragments that pierce flesh, mind and soul in rapid succession, quickening each strata of his being exponentially. Within a seismic heartbeat Jonah is fully awake to the world, his perceptions myriad, their sharpness infinite.

‘It’s a lie,’ he warns the stale shadow that regards him from the other end of his road – their road. ‘Finish it!’

Then his attention narrows to the grinning madman who crouches before him in the fishery. The would-be freedom fighter’s eyes glitter then glaze over as his mouth yawns ever wider. With a wet snap his face retracts from his skull like a sheath and a serpentine shape erupts from his jaws, screeching as it surfaces from the Sea of Souls. Rage radiates from the daemon in waves, palpably distorting the air around it as it uncoils from the hapless labourer. The tide washes over Jonah, stirring the wrath in his own soul, but the mirror’s blessing raises him above its reach. In that moment of merciless clarity the story of this travesty unravels before him.

He tastes the impotent rage of the nobody who opened the way to hell in the hope of freedom, and the fate of those caught up in the folly. None are innocent and none have cause to be, for they have known nothing but oppression and the viciousness it nurtures. Ire smoulders in all their hearts, eager for a spark to ignite it into violence. When the Ruzhalka bursts forth among them it is like a thousand sparks.

Jonah sees the unshackled labourers swarm the piscine daemon, slashing and pummelling it with pitiful weapons or none at all. Afire with savage liberty, they pay no heed to the carnage it wreaks upon them in return. One by one their mangled corpses are hurled into their preordained positions around the processing plant, building the scene that Jonah will walk into a little later.

The slaughter is over in minutes, then briefly rekindled when the white-coated hussars of Sergeant Goran’s squad appear. Their searing las-bolts are as inconsequential as the labourers’ tools, yet the soldiers last a little longer, perhaps because they try to kill the daemon from a distance. After they are slain the infernal interloper retreats to its host, neither satisfied nor sated, but too wary of this rigid new world to linger without violence to sustain it. Lurking inside its human shell it watches, waiting for more prey to come.

Jonah sees all this and feels nothing, for his soul has become as detached as his flesh, but later he will tremble and weep and rage at the horror. And then he will write about it – not of the events or the particulars, for his account is not a chronicle of trivia and tribulations, no matter how diabolical. No, it is texture
and insight that the book craves.

Truth.

The Ruzhalka is the first daemon Jonah has faced and it will yield many revelations. But first he must survive it.

He dives aside as the beast surges towards him in a torrent of black eyes and shark-like teeth bound by raw sinew. It twists after him, moving with the fluidity of an undersea predator; its glistening form gnashing and blinking in its eagerness to taste him. Jonah rolls away from its whiplash strikes, his torch beam slicing wildly through the darkness as he swerves about. Nearing a wall he vaults to his feet and leaps onto a table – and then away an instant before the daemon crushes it into splinters. Hurtling through the air he spins around with inhuman grace and brings his pistol to bear, not on the Ruzhalka, but on the witless heretic who hooked it.

The husk that was Verloc is still on his knees, his fleshless head thrown back so his gaping jaws face the ceiling like a skeletal flower yearning for the sun. His eyes have slipped down to his neck, where they stare blankly from the wattles that were once his face. His whole body shudders and quakes, contorted by the Ruzhalka’s exertions, for the daemon’s tail is still rooted in his distended throat.

‘Burn!’ Jonah bellows, channelling his contempt into a command as he fires. Coruscating with rainbow light his unholy bullet weaves between the beast’s coils and bores into Verloc’s skull, then detonates in a burst that lights up the room. The Ruzhalka screeches and glares its hate with a thousand orifices and eyes as its host combusts and scintillant flames race up its tail, unmaking whatever they touch.

Jonah crashes down onto his back with stunning force, his transcendence sacrificed to empower the killing shot. As the daemon lunges after him the fire catches up to its head, scorching it into charred ectoplasm a hand’s breadth from his face.

For a long time Jonah lies still, watching in wonder as the foetid miasma dissipated. When his survival sinks in he grins, as predatory as his slain prey.

‘Not tonight, you bastard,’ he taunts his true enemy, who waits in the distant future. ‘Not until we’re done.’

‘Preacher Tythe!’ a gruff voice snapped.

Jonah opened his eyes and met Sister Hagalaz’s quizzical gaze.

‘You were talking about a lie,’ the white-haired woman urged. ‘What lie?’

Jonah hesitated, appraising her. Whoever she was, she evidently carried some
authority here. Maybe she had some answers along with it. More to the point, he
wasn’t going to get past the guards on the bridge without using one of his
precious shards…

‘The lie is Olber Vedas, Sister,’ he said, coming to a decision.

‘How so?’ There was no denial or anger in Hagalaz’s tone. It was almost as if
she had expected such an answer.

‘Whatever happened at the schola, Vedas survived it,’ Jonah continued, feeling
the truth of it. ‘In fact I’d wager he was behind it.’

*Play the whole hand,* he thought. *All or nothing.*

‘Your Exegessor is a heretic, Sister,’ he said. ‘I’ve come to Vytarn to kill him.’

III

Lemarché watched Sister Asenath as she walked the Sacrasta’s ward, just as she
had done on the *Blood of Demeter* and the *Asclepius*. The Void Breachers were
not her responsibility now, yet Lemarché had been expecting her. They all had.

*Whatever else she may be, she remains our custodian,* he mused. *Such a soul
cannot relinquish its burdens. It is the executioner in her.*

What had surprised him was her lateness. It was past noon before she appeared,
by which time the Sacrasta’s routines were well under way. Mother Superior
Solanis and a retinue of red-robed hospitallers had begun their examinations and
ritual scouring of the wounded at First Dawn, proceeding systemically through
the ward. The most seriously injured men had been wheeled out, bound for the
surgeries, where they would receive deeper cleansing, both bodily and spiritual.
Breacher Rynfeld had finally succumbed to the sickness during the night, but
with the Emperor’s grace he would be the last. Solanis had assured him the
Palatine Chirurgeon had already begun devising a treatment plan for their
malady. Allegedly she had worked through the night, using Feizt as an
*absolution vector,* whatever that meant.

No, Lemarché couldn’t fault their new healers. Everything was managed
efficiently, even courteously, but without a whisper of compassion.

‘Greetings, Sister,’ he said as Asenath reached his bed.

‘Commissar,’ she replied distantly. ‘I trust my Sisters are tending to you well?’

‘Impeccably. The procedure to address my *ambulatory imparity,* as Mother
Solanis calls it, has been scheduled in for tomorrow.’

‘That is good,’ Asenath said, oblivious to his attempt at humour. Her eyes were
bloodshot, the dark rings beneath them like bruises against her pale skin.
‘Is everything in order, Sister?’ Lemarché asked softly, his levity gone. She hesitated a moment before answering. ‘No, I do not believe it is.’

‘Are my men in danger?’

‘They are dying, commissar. The Bronze Candle is their last hope. They are where they must be.’ Her raw-eyed gaze sharpened. ‘Do you trust me, Ichukwu Lemarché?’ It was the first time she had used his full name.

‘No,’ he said levelly. ‘I never have. You are not what you pretend to be.’

‘No, I am not,’ she admitted. ‘Nevertheless, I am asking you to trust me now.’

‘Then give me cause.’

‘For now this must suffice.’ Discreetly she slipped a cloth-wrapped object from her bag and slid it beneath his blanket. ‘Hide it, but keep it close. I cannot risk acquiring another.’

‘What exactly are you asking of me, Sister?’

‘Nothing as yet, commissar,’ Asenath replied. ‘Accept the Sacrasta’s aid, but be vigilant.’ She nodded and walked away.

*I am always vigilant,* Lemarché promised her retreating back.

It was many hours before the ward had emptied of the Sacrasta’s staff and the able-bodied troopers had departed for the hospital’s refectory. Only then did Lemarché inspect her surreptitious gift.

‘What are you up to, Sister Asenath?’ he murmured.

Inside the cloth was a laspistol, its bronze casing inlaid with a helical candle.

‘I didn’t get there,’ Jonah said, his voice brittle with static. ‘The path was sealed off.’

‘To the schola?’ Asenath asked, frowning at the poor vox signal.

‘To the whole damn spire, Sister.’

‘What?’ She was shocked. ‘Why?’

‘Vedas,’ Jonah said, making it a curse. ‘What’s the situation at the Sacrasta?’

‘Complicated. Where are you?’

‘On my way up to the city.’ There was a static-filled pause. ‘I can’t talk now, Sister. I’ll contact you tomorrow.’ His signal cut off.

Wearily Asenath removed the headset he’d given her and slumped back into her chair. She was alone in her quarters and the temptation to collapse onto the bed was immense. Last night’s heightened dream had drained her, but that was only part of it. The greater part lay with the twisted things she had found in the Reformatorium.

‘Beloved broken idols, forged in obeisance to imperfect abjection– Be silent!’
Asenath shouted. With a groan she forced herself to rise. She was due to meet with the palatine shortly. The thought of listening to Bhatori prattle on righteously, all the while masking what she had discovered was daunting, but it was too soon to confront her. Too dangerous…

_Then let us face the bitch together, dear Sister_, her companion urged. _That old crone’s as much my bone to pick apart as yours!_

‘No,’ Asenath said coldly. ‘When the time comes, she is mine.’
Chapter Seven
HUMILITY

I

The Testimony of Asenath Hyades – Seventh Statement

As I feared, my nightmare is approaching its apogee. Last night the shadow woman gained on me dangerously, her arching stilt-legged strides now outpacing my own. As she bore down on me she babbled her nonsense without surcease, her every sentence laced with mangled truths so I couldn’t help but listen and strive to unravel their meaning. Such inattention to my steps made my flight more hazardous yet, for the path had grown steeper and more slippery, as if it actively sought to unbalance me. If that happened it would be my final fall, for the daemon would be upon me before I rose. And what then? I know not, yet I am certain the consequences would be dire.

Dire to some, blissful to others!

I can no longer ignore what I have suspected for some time – the thing that stalks my dreams and the presence that haunts my waking thoughts are one and the same entity. Where it came from and how it latched on to me I cannot say, but its nature is surely malefic, its object undoubtedly my immortal soul. Since my arrival on the Candleworld it has baited me with half-truths and old hates that I can neither embrace nor deny.

Damned if you do or don’t. Undamned of Their lies if only you dare.

It is an article of the Imperium’s pride that no Adepta Sororitas warrior has ever fallen to daemonic possession and, come what may, I will not allow myself to be the first. Oh, that race was run and won by another unspun spinster of
the Throne long ago, grey sister.

I have resolved to sleep no more until my duty here is done, after which sleeping is unlikely to be a concern. Today I shall avail myself of a phylactery of holy stimulants from the Sacrasta’s stores, as I availed myself of a weapon for Commissar Lemarché yesterday. Thief! The Wafers Vigilant should see me through the next few days and ensure my wits are sharp enough to cut through the palatine’s lies.

And so we come to the crux of this statement.

My revered canoness, I am convinced that Preacher Tythe is mistaken about the source of the Candleworld’s taint. The heretic here is not the Theologus Exegessor, but the Palatine Chirurgeon.

Akaishi Bhatori’s callousness has always been reprehensible, but I am old and worn enough to accept that cruelty is commonplace in our beloved, infernally besieged Imperium. Indeed, many believe it is a necessary evil to hold the Arch-enemy in abeyance. Nonetheless the abominations I have uncovered in the palatine’s laboratorium are evidence of a soul that has strayed too far from the God-Emperor’s Light, even if it deludes itself that its intentions are noble.

Where to begin?

There are seven holding cells in the palatine’s sanctuary, each dedicated to one of the Virtues Illuminant, and within each a prisoner, though sacrifice is a more apposite term. In an act of supreme blasphemy, each of these wretches has been harrowed, twisted and reforged into a living likeness of one of the Virtues Incarnate. The ingenuity and skill with which these transfigurations have been wrought is exceeded only by the arrogance of the undertaking, yet the worst of it is the suffering of the victims, for the Incarnates are not joyful avatars. They were conceived as symbols of service and self-sacrifice in the face of grievous adversity, shouldering the burdens of our collective spirit. Each is an exemplar of the finest traits in mankind, but to become one is to experience excruciating torment.

Or transcendent ecstasy, perchance?

I shall describe only one of these exalted abominations, but that should suffice to condemn the palatine.

The Torn Prophet is the foremost of the Last Candle’s pantheon, and the only Incarnate derived from a being that actually walked upon this world, yet its appearance is the most ambiguous of the seven. While there are many theories about the founder’s identity, it is traditionally depicted as a hooded figure in voluminous robes, its arms cast wide as its body is riven apart by revelation. A
single surviving eye floats within the cowl, vast and tranquil, indifferent to the scourging of its body. How could such an abstract being be fabricated in the flesh?

With a will there’s always a wayward answer to be found, and lost souls aplenty to ply and play it upon.

Bhatori must have embraced this challenge long ago, for I unknowingly glimpsed its formative iterations during my training at the Sacrasta. Even in those times her sanctum’s cells were never empty, but only Veritas housed a long-term occupant – a tech-priest, or rather the legacy of one, for the cyborg had been fastidiously disassembled into its constituent parts. Its sculpted metal limbs were arranged around the gutted shell of its torso, while its biomechanical organs were suspended in tanks around the room, still pulsing and whirring with activity. The head, a massive adamantium skull, was perched atop a pedestal at the centre of the room like a false idol. I remember its eyes swivelling about, as if looking for a way out. Those oversized orbs looked incongruously human, their irises a vivid green that repudiated their lifeless vessel.

The pieces of this puzzle were all connected, woven together by a web of tubes and wires that preserved the cyborg in gestalt stasis. At first I believed the palatine was attempting to aid the creature, but later I understood it was another of her beloved experiments. What I never imagined was the true nature of her ambitions.

Or the false contrivance of her inhibitions and the enfeebling stitches they sewed in fertile souls.

Yesterday, when I peered through the viewing window of Veritas, I saw a ragged shape floating above the ground. Its face and form were shrouded in a white robe, but skeletal metal arms jutted from the billowing folds of cloth, their long fingers undulating as if the creature were swimming through the air. A tear ran from its hood to the hem of its robes, bisecting it with a hand-span of nothingness. But it was the eye that I recognised – a vast viridian orb suspended inside the riven cowl.

It was the tech-priest, its modular anatomy reconfigured and perhaps fitted with gravitic suspensors to mimic the Torn Prophet. I cannot say whether anything of the cyborg’s sanity remains, but given Bhatori’s obsessions, I suspect it is suffering in its apotheosis. Absurdly, I find myself wondering what happened to its other eye.

Four of the other cells boasted equally blasphemous, if less ambitious creations, but there were two discrepancies to the pattern.
Firstly, it appears that Bhatori has not yet found her Blind Watchman, for the cell devoted to Vigilans was empty. And then there was Humilitas, whose occupant was not at all like the others. Though the prisoner bore a subtle resemblance to its assigned avatar, it appeared to be untainted by the palatine’s handiwork, yet despite its outward innocuousness it may be the most dangerous of them all.

Asenath held her breath as the hatch of the Reformatorium slid aside, then exhaled in relief when she saw the palatine was absent. Bhatori had evidently worked through the night again, for there was fresh equipment clustered around the Tabula Rasa. To her surprise the man who lay upon the surgical table was still alive, his chest rising and falling more steadily than yesterday. Could Bhatori’s ministrations actually be helping Toland Feizt?

If so it is only because failure displeases her. The thought was perversely comforting, even if Asenath wasn’t sure it was her own.

Dismissing Feizt for now, she turned to the cell bearing the anomalous avatar and saw Angelique was already waiting by the door, its porcelain face directed towards her.

‘You knew I’d come, didn’t you?’ Asenath murmured. Yesterday she had shrunk back from confronting the prisoner behind the door, all the while knowing there was no alternative if she hoped to find answers. Of the six sham avatars, it was the only one that might be remotely sane.

Steeling herself, she crossed to the cell and placed a hand on its sensor plate. It pulsed an angry red and squawked a denial.

‘Open it,’ Asenath commanded Angelique. As she expected, the servitor complied immediately. After all, this was what it wanted – or rather what its secret master wanted, for Asenath was certain the witch had seized control of the cyborg’s etiolated mind.

With a brush of its gloved hand Angelique coaxed a chime of approval from the sensor. There was a muted clang of internal locks withdrawing and a wheeled handle extruded from the door. Uttering a prayer of protection, Asenath spun the wheel and pulled the hatch open. Not allowing herself a moment’s hesitation, she stepped inside.

Hand in hand we leap into the terrible unknown!

Asenath was braced for the cold miasma of corruption and the skin-prickling revulsion that psykers had always evoked in her, but she felt nothing.

‘Hello,’ the witch said.
‘Hello,’ Asenath replied reflexively. Tristesse had found its way into her hand, its muzzle levelled at the prisoner who sat cross-legged at the back of the cell. ‘I won’t hurt you,’ he promised, regarding her solemnly. He was no more than eight or nine years old, yet his hair was entirely white. It hung loosely about his gaunt face, stark against his dark complexion. ‘That’s good,’ Asenath said uncertainly. ‘I don’t want to hurt you either.’ But she didn’t lower her weapon. ‘Thank you, there is already too much hurt here.’ The boy’s speech was stilted, as though he were unused to talking. ‘Has the palatine hurt you?’ Asenath asked. ‘There’s never enough to eat. Sometimes she makes things go dark or cold.’ He shrugged, his bones showing through his white tunic. ‘But mostly she just wants me to draw.’ ‘So I see.’

The cell walls were covered in sheets of parchment, all bearing illustrations rendered in fine black lines. More littered the floor, along with an assortment of inkpots, quills and measuring implements. Invariably the subject was either the Koronatus Ring, elaborately mapped and embellished with its coterie of avatars, or portraits of the Incarnates themselves. The images swarmed with intricate details that hooked Asenath’s eyes, dragging them from one element to the next without respite, hinting at some obscure epiphany if only she could see the whole picture. ‘Don’t look,’ the boy warned. 

Do!

Asenath snapped her attention away from the drawings. They unnerved her more than their creator. Their subjects were holy and their style exquisite, yet somehow the conjunction of the two felt profane. Predatory. ‘You have a gift,’ she said stiffly. ‘She says that too.’ ‘You don’t enjoy drawing?’ ‘I don’t know.’ He frowned. ‘Drawing makes me see… things.’ His voice dropped to a whisper. ‘I think they’re daemons.’ He spoke the word like something only vaguely understood, but unquestionably terrible. Hearing the foul term on the lips of one so young sickened Asenath, though she knew what he was. Abruptly the boy’s expression brightened. ‘What’s your name?’ he asked. ‘Sister Asenath,’ she answered cautiously, wondering why he hadn’t plucked it
from her thoughts.

‘Greetings, Sister Asenath,’ he said formally. ‘I am Athanazius.’

‘The Emperor’s blessings upon you, Athanazius,’ Asenath responded with equal gravity, her hands inscribing the holy aquila. To her surprise the witch didn’t flinch from the benediction. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘A while.’ His face clouded again. ‘Since the daemons came.’

Tristesse twitched in Asenath’s hand. ‘Where are these daemons, Athanazius?’

‘At the schola.’ The boy looked down. ‘They came when he woke the machine up.’

‘Who?’ He didn’t reply. ‘Athanazius, what happened at the schola? Please, this is important. I—’

‘You should go, Sister Asenath,’ he said, cocking his head sharply, as if listening to something. ‘She’s coming.’

II

‘Sacred Throne,’ Jonah breathed as he entered the librarium’s central rotunda and craned his neck to take in its soaring galleries. They lined the walls of the vast hall in cloistered tiers, every one crowded with shelves of dark wood bearing books, files and data-slates, along with more esoteric objects he couldn’t identify. Marble-balconied walkways served the galleries, their paths criss-crossing overhead in a lattice that occluded the dome high above. Access platforms rose and fell between the walkways, their whisper-quiet pistons combining into a sibilant, almost subliminal chorus. The umbral figure of the Torn Prophet was everywhere, hewn into the walls and gazing ambivalently from the tapestries draping the balconies.

Scores of Sisters Dialogus in the azure robes of the Silver Candle served within this cavernous temple of learning, either wandering its paths or sitting at desks along the galleries, their heads bowed over their work. Hundreds of younger women in the blue-and-white tunics of the order’s lay staff hurried silently through the maze, seeking or returning books for their betters, while servo-skulls flitted between the levels, their silver-plated craniums crowned with artificial candles that burned cold.

This is no place for flames, Jonah reflected as one of the diminutive machines whirred past him, its pincers clutching a sheaf of scrolls.

‘I’d heard your librarium was remarkable,’ he whispered to his guide. ‘But I never imagined… this,’ he finished lamely.
'The Librarium Profundis was consecrated during the First Illumination of the Candleworld,' Sister Hagalaz replied. ‘It is the oldest building in the city and second only to the Candelabrum cathedral in sanctity.’

The gruff woman’s manner was more subdued here, but she still sported the unkempt robes she’d worn on the road and the servo-skull that hovered by her shoulder – she called it Pretorius – was battered and grimy. Despite her appearance everyone they had passed deferred to her without question, including the guards at the librarium’s gates. Jonah suspected her shabbiness was cultivated to signify her contempt for mundane matters, but he couldn’t decide if it was heartfelt or affected.

‘Almost a thousand years of observation, contemplation and analysis is enshrined here,’ Hagalaz proclaimed reverently, ‘along with countless works from the Imperium’s deeper past.’

‘It’s magnificent,’ Jonah said sincerely.

His quest had always carried him to the most frayed reaches of the Imperium – far-flung frontier planets where the Ecclesiarchy’s grandiose dreams had never borne fruit, or exhausted ones where their progeny had long gone to seed. His home world had been little better, even before the unholy night swathed it. He was unaccustomed to beauty, never mind majesty.

Jonah’s eyes widened as he glimpsed a giant in shimmering blue armour stride across one of the galleries overhead and disappear behind a bookshelf. Was that a Space Marine?

‘Come,’ Hagalaz urged. ‘We have matters to discuss, Preacher Tythe.’

Yes, we do, Jonah agreed, following her across the rotunda.

Yesterday, night had crept in by the time they reached the Silver Candle’s precincts in the heart of the city and Hagalaz had refused to talk further, insisting they adjourn until morning. Jonah had been quartered in the order’s residency halls, his status somewhere between a guest and a prisoner. They hadn’t searched him or locked him up, but a dour, rake-thin Sister Dialogus called Haruki had stood in attendance outside his door all night. She was trailing behind them now, watchful as a hawk and almost certainly armed.

They don’t know what to make of me, Jonah gauged, but they want something or I’d be dead by now.

Their party passed through the hall into an arched corridor lined with doors. Hagalaz led them to the last of these, where a short, round-faced woman awaited them in a wood-panelled reading room, a data-slate clutched protectively in her hands. Despite her youth she wore the robes of a fully ordained Sister Dialogus
and her dark bob was streaked with silver.

‘You have gathered everything I requested, Sister Navreen?’ Hagalaz asked, closing the door behind them.

‘Indeed, revered Preceptor Cognostic,’ the young woman answered with a bow. ‘I abided here throughout the night to ensure that everything was prepared.’

*Preceptor,* Jonah echoed. It confirmed what he’d already guessed – this Hagalaz was a woman of rank, even more senior than the Sacrasta’s palatine if he remembered the hierarchy of the sisterhood correctly.

‘I have also taken the liberty of organising the material and preparing extensive notes, preceptor,’ Sister Navreen added primly, indicating the table behind her. Books and scrolls covered it in tidy piles.

‘No, that will not do,’ Hagalaz declared, striding to the table.

‘Your reverence?’

‘He has to find it for himself, Sister, or not at all.’ The preceptor swept a hand across the table, demolishing the stacks with unseemly enthusiasm, then proceeded to jumble up the material. Sister Navreen’s crestfallen expression would have been comical under other circumstances.

‘What’s this about, preceptor?’ Jonah asked warily.

‘That is for you to discover, priest,’ Hagalaz said. Apparently satisfied with her efforts, she stepped away from the table. ‘Storm Calliope, Sister,’ she prompted her junior.

‘Yes, your reverence.’ Sister Navreen turned to Jonah. ‘Preacher Tythe, our orbital sensors have detected a storm front approaching from the gulf. It is expected to reach the Koronatus Ring within five days.’

‘I understood storms were common here, Sister?’

‘Indeed, but not of this magnitude,’ Navreen replied fussily. ‘Storm Calliope is unlike any recorded since the Fourth Illumination, over six centuries ago.’

‘You think it’s unnatural,’ Jonah ventured, glancing at Hagalaz.

‘The unnatural *is* natural here, priest,’ the preceptor said, her blue eyes shining. ‘The Sea of Souls washes against the Candleworld’s shores. That is why there are no witch-kin here. Their kind cannot withstand its tides.’

‘But why come here at all?’ Jonah asked, thinking of the horrors he had uncovered even on the most mundane worlds. ‘The risk…’

‘Is one we embrace in the God-Emperor’s name,’ Hagalaz proclaimed. ‘There is a blessing within this curse, priest – salvation or damnation!’ She sliced the air with a rigid hand for emphasis. ‘That is why the Torn Prophet claimed this world. Revelation demands fortitude and faith.’
This isn’t an argument I’m going to win, Jonah decided. Or a fight worth dying for...

‘I understand,’ he said, nodding earnestly. ‘Your faith wards—’

He barely felt the sting of the preceptor’s backhanded slap, though her rings drew blood.

‘Don’t patronise me, outsider,’ Hagalaz growled, her guttural accent stronger than ever. ‘I know you think us fools.’

‘Truthfully, I don’t know what to think,’ Jonah confessed, rubbing his bleeding lip for appearances’ sake. ‘I thought we were going to talk about Vedas.’

‘Oh, I know the Exegessor is alive,’ Hagalaz said dismissively, ‘and I don’t doubt he had the resources to contact you. I even believe you think you can kill him.’

Jonah hesitated, taking this in. ‘And you intend to stop me?’

‘No, I want you to prove you can do it.’ Hagalaz jabbed a finger at the jumbled books. ‘Begin by showing me you have the wit and the will to see.’

‘What am I looking for?’

‘Truth, always truth.’ She smiled icily. ‘This room is yours. Sister Navreen will assist you in your research, but not lead you.’ The young Dialogus blushed at the implicit censure. ‘Impress me, Jonah Tythe.’

‘The storm?’ Jonah asked as she headed for the door. ‘What is its relevance?’

‘Illuminate him, Sister!’ Hagalaz called over her shoulder as she strode out.

‘Sister Navreen?’ Jonah turned to his designated aide. ‘Illuminate me please?’

‘There is a perplexing synchronicity to the storm’s inception, sir,’ the young Dialogus informed him gravely. ‘It was detected within…’ She checked her data-slate: ‘Radiant-Seven-Seven-Three-Four.’

‘And what is Radiant-Seven-Seven-Three-Four, Sister?’

‘The time your arrival was recorded, Preacher Tythe. It is when you stepped onto the Perihelion.’

III

The black void was worse than the nightmare. There was no eternal road or infernal stalker here, but no hope either – nothing except the memory of thought, for in this no-place even the self was a shadow, its only surviving passions despair and the longing for its cessation.

Then, without rhyme or reason, the void was gone.

Asenath plunged back into being, her mind recoiling from the sudden onslaught
of sensations. Bright lights assailed her from above, dazzling her with their insistence. The air was cold and sour with the stench of cleansing unguents.

She closed her eyes then opened them again, afraid the darkness might not let go this time. Dry-heaving, she clutched at a nearby table and stumbled when it rolled away. A gurney? As her eyes adjusted she saw more of the trolleys around her, and beyond them the dismal red and white tiles of the Sacrasta. She was in a large chamber, its far wall inset with rows of square hatches. A few hung open, their metal trays extruded like tongues from yawning mouths. Not all were empty.

The Mortifactorum, Asenath realised, staring at the cadavers lying on the trays. One of them was Breacher Rynfeld.

Her breath frosting in the chill air, she crossed the room to the dead trooper. His chest was splayed open, the flesh around the cavity folded back and pinned with metal clamps, snapped ribs jutting from the raw edges like teeth. His organs were gone, presumably stowed in specimen jars somewhere. The palatine had evidently performed the autopsy she craved.

‘You didn’t even close him up,’ Asenath whispered, sickened by the disrespect. Bhatori hadn’t shut Rynfeld’s eyes either. They stared up at her blankly, their irises faded almost to white.

Asenath offered a prayer for the trooper then leaned against his tray, trying to gather her thoughts. What was she doing here? She recalled heeding the witch-boy’s warning and hurrying to the basement stairs, and then her fear as the door at the top of the stairwell had begun to open…

_It was the crone_, her shadow prompted. _We were too late, Sister._

Yes… yes, that was correct. They – _she_ – had fled along the corridor before she was seen, intending to hide here until Bhatori had passed. She remembered opening the door and then… Then there was only darkness.

_Don’t dawdle, Sister! We mustn’t linger in the bitch’s corpse store. And there are things we must attend to._

Something tried to jerk her round, like an alien reflex. Asenath resisted and turned slowly, of her own accord.

_Do you see, Sister?_

Another body was sprawled beside a gurney nearby, where Asenath hadn’t been able to see it before – a woman in the scarlet robes of a hospitaller. She lay on her back, a scalpel buried in her right eye.

Cautiously Asenath approached the corpse. She recognised the woman from the Breachers’ ward, though she didn’t know her name.
Sister Enkel. I heed our ears more keenly than you do, Sister.

‘Be silent,’ Asenath muttered distractedly. Beneath her revulsion something about the scene nagged at the analytical part of her mind. Abruptly she had it – the murdered chapel attendant on the Blood of Demeter. Though the instruments of death differed, the killings were eerily alike, both victims pierced through the right eye. But it went deeper than that. She could feel the gleeful viciousness behind the murders.

The candle was more creative, her dark passenger observed airily, but the scalpel more elegant.

Another memory unfolded – Sister Enkel turning as the Mortifactorum door opens behind her. The surprise on her face turning to terror as she sees the intruder’s face, then her curtailed cry as the thrown scalpel finds its mark.

‘What did you do?’ Asenath hisses.

What we always do when needs must, Sister. What we’ve done since Providence.

‘No.’

Remember!

‘No!’ But how could she not?

Once again she trudges through the dark streets of the snow-choked town, her hooded greatcoat wrapped tightly around her, a scarf shielding her face from the wind. Under the coat her blood-soaked robes are beginning to freeze. She has never known a cold as malevolent as this. The locals call this hovel Trinity, perhaps because it is ruled equally by ice, wind and snow, or perhaps because it once harboured something more than misery.

‘There’s nothing so bitter as a Providence winter,’ their allies among the Arkan had warned when Father Deliverance announced this expedition to the unruly northern territories of his world.

His world?

He doesn’t call it that – perhaps doesn’t even think it – yet Asenath knows he believes it all the same, for this planet has possessed him more completely than he can ever hope to possess it, no matter how many of its people he converts to the Imperial Creed or how many temples he plants in its capricious soil.

The most recent of them looms out of the blizzard before her, its wooden façade aping the Imperium’s gothic architecture. Despite its crudity the temple is a marvel among the hunched shacks of the frozen frontier town where their crusade has stalled. It is the two hundred and nineteenth that Father
Deliverance has consecrated on Providence. Asenath has been keeping a tally, of the temples and much more besides.

Three years have passed since her patron led her here. Last winter his crusade was deemed victorious and the bulk of his forces departed the planet for new conquests, but Asenath knows he will never be finished with this world, nor it with him. But she... oh, she is finally done with both of them.

The guards outside the temple salute her sluggishly, their faces hidden by their wide-brimmed hats and scarves. Like all the troops accompanying this expedition they are indigenous converts, part of the confessor’s newly formed loyalist confederation. She doubts it will outlast him, any more than this temple will outlast the decade. Providence is too stubborn for honest faith.

Her patron awaits her inside, kneeling before a roughly hewn granite altar as he prays. His naked torso is criss-crossed with the bloody stripes of his self-inflicted penance, the six-tailed whip he used to exact it still dangling from his right hand. This is how he atones whenever he asks her to ply her darker talents upon the flesh of his enemies, as he has tonight. There are many old weals among the fresh wounds, but not nearly enough to pay a fair price for Asenath’s soul.

The confessor rises to meet her as she approaches, his expression unreadable behind his heavy beard. He wears the past three years like thirty, his face haggard, its copper complexion faded to a wan sepia and tarnished with sores and seams. His tonsure has become a wild mane that hangs below his waist, vying with his beard for supremacy. Both are more grey than black now, just as his soul has become more black than golden, if indeed there was anything other than fool’s gold there to begin with. Only his eyes have retained their vitality, yet they are the most unsettling part of him, for they look like something plucked and replanted from a younger being.

‘I have failed,’ Asenath reports. ‘The shaman was not afraid of pain. She embraced it.’

‘That is unwelcome news,’ the confessor declares, his voice still as vibrant as his eyes. ‘Her compliance might have swayed the Norland tribes to accede peacefully. They revere and fear her kind.’ He shakes his head sorrowfully, a shepherd despairing at his folly-prone flock. ‘We will burn her in the town square tomorrow. It will set an example and please our allies in the confederation. They have no love for these northern savages.’

‘She is gone,’ Asenath says. ‘She died cursing this town and its folk.’

He looks at her questioningly. ‘That was careless of you, my Vigilant Paladin.’
‘No, I chose to take her life.’
‘Why would you do that?’ he asks, drawing closer.
‘Because it was enough.’
‘That is not for you to judge,’ he says coldly. ‘Do you think I take pleasure in the suffering we must bring in the God-Emperor’s name? Do you think I enjoy this?’ He swings the whip against his bleeding chest in emphasis. When she offers no reply he smiles ruefully, interpreting her silence as contrition. ‘My daughter, you and I do His holy work together, but I am His anointed hand.’

Are you? Asenath wonders bleakly. It is her hands that have shaped the fate of this world, deflecting its course from defiance of the Imperium into internecine war. How many rebels has she turned to their cause? Generals, legislators and scholars, even the occasional poet – they have all submitted to her ministrations. Pain and the terror of it have proven more effective than all the crusade’s words, wealth or military strength. No, if the twist in this world’s tale belongs to anyone it is surely to Sister Mercy.

‘Why did you choose me?’ Asenath asks. Of the scores of Battle Sisters assembled along the Prophet’s Causeway on that fateful day, why her? It is the only question that matters to her now.

‘How could I not?’ he replies. ‘You stood above your fellow Sisters as your Perihelion towers over its subordinate peaks – a resplendent soul straining against its mortal cage, yet one utterly unsullied by pride. Once I saw you, I saw no other, Asenath Hyades!’

His voice has lost none of its sincerity, but it has no hold over her anymore. She has heard this answer before, predicted word for word by the witch-woman she executed less than an hour ago. The shaman told her she would taste the lie in those words the next time she heard them, and she was right – they are like sweetened poison, their duplicity more bitter than the killing cold outside.

‘I understand these years have been onerous for you,’ Father Deliverance begins, reaching out to touch her shoulder, ‘but we...’ He trails off, staring at the long needle that has transfixed his hand midway to its destination. ‘Daughter?’ he asks, looking up in confusion.

‘Deceiver,’ Sister Mercy hisses and yanks the needle free in a spurt of bright blood. Before he can speak again, she jabs it through each of his golden eyes, first the left, then the right, neither strike deep enough to kill, both certain to blind.

‘Truth is the first and only lasting light,’ she decrees over his agonised sobbing. ‘May you find it in your darkness.’
Then she hurls the needle away and walks out into the night.

It had to be done, Sister Mercy said softly. Perhaps that was true, but it didn’t excuse her delight in the deed.

Asenath fell to her knees beside the slain hospitaller. The woman had to be one of the palatine’s close acolytes, else she wouldn’t have been in the Mortifactorum, but that was only a faint comfort.

Conceal the body, Mercy urged. Then we must be gone from here.

Asenath knew her dark sister was right, but she lingered anyway.

‘The chapel,’ she whispered, remembering her blackout on the Blood of Demeter. It had felt so much like this one. ‘The desecration and slaughter…’

Sister, you must act swiftly!

‘Was that you?’

The Exodii monks were worms! Their ending was a mercy. A titter escaped from Asenath’s throat. If not mercifully accomplished!

‘No…’ Asenath closed her eyes, trying to shut out the memory before–

She sees the portly attendant’s face redden in shock as she approaches the chapel doors. Mercy has stripped their shared body naked and left their garments a little way back so they won’t be soiled by the carnage to come. With a salacious smirk she strides past the stunned gatekeeper and saunters up to the altar beyond, ignoring the blind monks for the moment. Simpering, she lifts the hallowed candle from its resting place and returns to the attendant.

‘Would you like to see the light?’ Mercy asks him coyly, then rams the candle through his right eye so hard he slams into the wall behind. His remaining orb stares at her dully as he slides to the ground. She licks the air to taste his soul as it passes into the maelstrom. ‘Never go gently into the long night,’ she advises.

The tips of her fingers are tingling. Raising her hands, Mercy gasps in delight when she sees they are tipped with long black talons. Crooning to herself, she re-enters the chapel and sizes up the monks. Where, oh where to begin?

‘And Glicke?’ Asenath whispered in dawning horror. ‘You took his knife…’

He had no need of it after we’d put dear Sanghata’s gift to good use, her sister replied. Why scribble in ink when there’s more vital fluid to be had?

Asenath recalled the desecrated quill and the rest of the memory struck like lightning.

She glances over her shoulder to make sure nobody in the ship’s infirmary is watching, then leans over the sleeping trooper on the rearmost bunk. Konrad
Glicke’s eyes open in surprise as she stifles his mouth with one hand, then widen as he sees her grin. She blows him a kiss then jabs Canoness Sanghata’s quill into his ear and twists.

‘Have there been others?’ Asenath asked numbly. Her shadow didn’t answer, which was all the answer she needed.
Four days have elapsed since I last set quill to parchment. Outwardly they have passed in tranquillity, even yielding a measure of hope for my charges, if not for myself. Since our arrival at the Sacrasta only Breacher Rynfeld has succumbed to the Razorblight, but his death and subsequent dissection at the palatine’s hands may not be in vain, for the treatments she has devised to purge the xenos taint are showing promise. Akaishi Bhatori may be a monster, and a maker of them, but I cannot fault her brilliance. Perhaps some good may come of her inhumanity.

But now I must write of the shadows under the skin, of both the Sacrasta and myself, for that’s where the best tales always lie – long, short or taller than a damned girl’s doubts and dreams, all true to tell until told.

Each morning I have returned to the palatine’s basement sanctum and conversed with the prisoner she has chosen for her Harrowed Artisan. He is a witch, yet I believe he is an innocent – no, much more than that! – a being of passing grace. Despite his tender years he has the gravity of a far older soul, albeit one still seeking the words and wisdom to express itself. I sense all the Virtues Illuminant at work in this boy, but humility above all, which is likely what girds him against the Archenemy’s temptations. Whenever we speak I find myself wondering what he might become if granted the opportunity to flourish and nourish his gift unfettered by the insipid tenets of morality.
My revered Canoness Sanghata, I am aware that such sentiments would be deemed heretical by many in our convent, but the Holy Imperium has always numbered stalwart witch-kin among its heroes, not least among the Librarians of the Adeptus Astartes. Is it so unlikely that a child who has endured in the shallows of the Sea of Souls might grow into a man capable of wielding its energies for mankind’s betterment? **Or its pristine dismemberment?**

Whatever else occurs here, I have resolved to save this boy, Athanazius. I suspect Bhatori has delayed his modifications until he is older, not out of kindness, but so he will better fit the avatar’s aspect. I will not allow her to twist his body and maim his soul as she has done to the others caught in her web, and as she is currently doing to Toland Feizt.

I should have guessed her intentions towards the breach sergeant from the start, for his hulking form and stamina are the perfect foundations for her missing avatar.

The Blind Watchman, like the Penitent Knight of Temperans, is a warrior figure, its height and build mirroring that of a Space Marine. Unlike the armoured Knight, the Watchman’s alabaster flesh is naked save for a loincloth and a bandage covering its cauterised eye sockets. Smoke wafts perpetually from these wounds, for they still smoulder with the sacred fire that took the avatar’s sight. Traditionally the Watchman carries no weapons, its preternatural mastery of unarmed combat more than sufficient to vanquish the unclean.

**Not on my watch, blind Sister!**

Three days ago I noticed that Feizt’s skin was bleached of colour, like a bloodless corpse, yet his breathing was stronger than ever, the wound in his midriff sealed up and fading. Then yesterday morning there were wisps of smoke rising from his face. When I looked closer I realised his eyes were gone and their sockets glazed red, the flesh within broiling and restoring itself with an audible sizzle.

I have no idea how Bhatori accomplished this vicious trick. Perhaps she learned her most arcane craft from the tech-priest who became her first sacrifice. I have often wondered how that unfortunate creature came to be on the Candleworld, and whether Bhatori lured it here, but if that is true then how far back does this heresy extend? And does it begin and end with the palatine?

Athanazius’ talk of daemons overrunning the schola lends credence to Preacher Tythe’s suspicions about the Theologus Exegessor. Could it be that Vedas and Bhatori are working in concert to fulfil some overarching blasphemy?

I believe Tythe may know more, but our contact has been limited since he
entered the service of the Silver Candle. We speak every evening across the vox and he has hinted that he is engaged in research of some import, but is unforthcoming with the details. I admit I have been equally circumspect about my own discoveries; however, it is not distrust that holds me back, but shame.

**The first and foremost sin!**

Recent events have compelled me to face the truth of myself and the depth of my damnation. I have not slept in days, but though the Wafers Vigilant hold my nightmares at bay, I fear my dark stalker SISTER! has already overtaken me. When I look in the mirror I feel her gazing back through my eyes and wonder, how long? How long before I am the reflection and she the reality of me?

‘Athanazius, I have another question,’ Asenath said to the boy opposite her. They were sitting cross-legged on the floor of his cell, only a couple of paces between them.

‘Yes, Sister Asenath?’

‘Why haven’t you escaped? Your slave could set you free.’

‘My slave?’ He looked puzzled.

‘The servitor – Angelique,’ Asenath prompted.

‘Oh, she isn’t a slave.’

‘Yet you control her… its mind.’ Despite the porcelain-faced cyborg’s feminine aspect, Asenath couldn’t think of it as a *she.* Nothing meaningful survived the brutal process that transformed a human being into a servitor. To ascribe such a truncated creature a gender was repellent. ‘It obeys your commands,’ she pressed.

‘No,’ Athanazius replied. ‘She is my friend. We talk… without words, but the Qareen doesn’t belong to anybody.’

‘The Qareen?’ Asenath frowned. The word had an unsettling, alien cadence, yet it was somehow familiar.

‘That’s her real name,’ Athanazius said. ‘She’s been here so long nobody remembers it. Or how to talk to her.’

‘You’re saying it isn’t a servitor?’

‘She is a guard – a guardian,’ he corrected himself.

‘A guardian of what, Athanazius?’

‘The Ring, of course, Sister.’ He sounded surprised, as if this were obvious.

‘Somebody has to watch over it.’

‘How can she do that from down here?’

‘She sees far.’ The boy shrugged. ‘That’s how she knows when the crone is
coming.’ He grinned at the word *crone*. He’d learnt it from her.

‘I thought you saw that, Athanazius. Your… gift.’

‘No, that doesn’t work in here. The walls stop it. I can only hear the Qareen. She warns me.’ His grin faded. ‘That’s why I like it here, even with the crone. It’s quiet.’

*A psi-dampening field*, Asenath guessed. Yes, it made sense for the palatine to install something of the kind, but that still left the question of Angelique. If the creature wasn’t a servitor then what in the Eternal Throne’s name was it?

‘But you’re right, Sister,’ Athanazius said. ‘The Qareen says I should leave this place. Will you help me?’

‘Why do you need me?’ Asenath asked cautiously. She had already promised herself she would aid him, but now she wasn’t so sure.

‘I could get out of *here*, but after that…’ Athanazius flipped his hands over, palms up in a disconcertingly mature gesture. ‘The red Sisters would stop me. That’s why the Qareen wanted us to meet. She said you were different.’

*Different?* Asenath echoed. *More different than you imagine, boy…*

‘Where do you want to go, Athanazius?’

‘Vigilans,’ he answered, ‘the Watchspire.’

‘Why there?’

‘It’s where I’m meant to be… when it comes.’

‘When what comes?’ Asenath leaned closer.

‘The fire, Sister.’ He closed his eyes. ‘The burning.’

Dressed in his black greatcoat and high-peaked cap, Commissar Lemarché strode along the red-tiled corridors, defying the Sacrasta’s staff to obstruct him. Every step of his right leg was laboured, the recently fitted augmetic still throwing his balance. Nevertheless the elegantly fashioned limb was an improvement on his old prosthetic, and exercising it offered excellent cover for roaming the hospital.

To his surprise he wasn’t followed on his wanderings – unless he had a very talented shadow – but he refrained from straying too far from the main corridors, lest he arouse suspicion. It was enough to give him a picture of the Sacrasta’s layout and a sense of the numbers here so he could sketch out a tactical plan. Sister Asenath, who appeared to have a freer run of the place, had filled in the key blanks, including the location of the weapon stores, though she remained cagey about her concerns.

‘We must prepare for the worst, commissar,’ she had advised, ‘but by the
Emperor’s grace my fears will prove groundless.’

Lemarché didn’t believe it. Asenath knew something was coming else she wouldn’t have smuggled him a gun, yet she was still keeping her damnable secrets.

Lost in thought, he almost collided with a woman as she stepped from an intersecting corridor. With a grunt, she backed away, clutching the blankets she carried protectively, as if fearful he might try to steal them. Though she wore the plain cerise apron of a junior hospitaller she was well into her middle years, with a broad, doughy face and sagging jowls. Disconcertingly she was many times his bulk and despite her slouched posture, nearly as tall.

‘My apologies, good Sister,’ Lemarché said, offering a rueful smile. ‘My attention was elsewhere.’

The stranger stared at him sullenly, but said nothing. Gauging her dull eyes and slack lips he wondered if she was even capable of speech.

‘Be on your way, Sister Bugaeve!’ Mother Solanis snapped, emerging from the corridor behind the woman. ‘Quickly now!’

‘Yes, Mother Superior,’ the junior mumbled hoarsely, then shambled away.

‘The Bronze Candle’s lights do not shine equally brightly,’ Solanis observed, her tone unexpectedly gentle, ‘but we never abandon our wards.’ She turned to Lemarché. ‘I see the augmetic is serving you well, commissar.’

‘Most definitely, my lady,’ he replied. ‘I am in your debt, as are my troops. Yours is an order of miracle workers.’

‘We are merely instruments of the Emperor’s benevolence,’ Solanis demurred, ‘but it is heartening that our ministrations are proving efficacious.’

‘Indeed. I had hoped to thank Palatine Bhatori in person.’

‘The palatine is immersed in crucial research, but I shall pass on your sentiments, commissar.’

‘I also wanted to ask her about Breach Sergeant Feitz,’ Lemarché pressed. ‘My company holds him in high esteem.’

‘Forgive me, I was on my way to inform you.’ Solanis clasped her hands, as if in prayer. ‘The breach sergeant passed into the Emperor’s care shortly after First Dawn. Regrettably his sickness was too advanced to purge.’

‘That is… unfortunate,’ Lemarché said, frowning. ‘When may we attend him? The company must pay its respects.’

‘His body has been cremated to prevent further contagion, but we shall return the ashes to you.’

‘I see,’ Lemarché murmured. I see a lie.
He couldn’t explain the intuition, yet he trusted it as he’d always trusted his instincts. That discipline ran deeper than his Imperial training, rooted in the savage rites of survival that had shaped his early childhood. Logically someone in Feizt’s condition should be dead, but Lemarché didn’t believe it. The bastard had endured too much to pass so quietly.

‘Please allow me to inform the men in my own manner,’ he said, already certain he would say nothing to them. He needed them focused, not brooding over a lie.

‘There is another matter I must raise, commissar,’ Solanis said. ‘We have been notified that a storm is expected to fall upon the Ring tomorrow evening. There is no cause for alarm, but though the Sacrasta is storm-warded it is an ancient building. Please ensure your men remain in their ward once the warning bell sounds.’ She offered an empty smile. ‘For their own safety.’

‘I understand, my lady,’ Lemarché affirmed. The news evoked an unfamiliar emotion in him. It took him several moments to identify it. Dread.

Is this it? he wondered. Is it the storm, Asenath? Is that what’s coming for us?

As the hatch to the witch-boy’s cell closed behind her, Asenath stopped, staring at the slumbering giant chained to the Tabula Rasa. There was a large black speck on his forehead. As she narrowed her eyes, it moved.

A fly, she realised in disgust. She had the irrational feeling it was watching her furtively, like a sinner caught in an improper act. With a buzz it flitted into Feizt’s left eye socket, seemingly undeterred by the heat within.

‘It can’t be,’ Asenath breathed. The flies had been a collective delusion conjured up by her charges – a metaphor for the sickness eating them alive.

Belief conceives reality, her dark sister theorised breezily. Faith and fear alike beget flesh from phantasy.

‘The world is not so infirm,’ Asenath murmured, stepping onto the dais bearing the Tabula Rasa. She had to look, if only to confirm her denial.

Oh, the whole wild world’s riddled with cracks and leaks if you dare to seek them out, but even if you don’t, they’ll come find and unwind you from within.

Asenath peered into the cavities where Feizt’s eyes had been, but saw nothing through the smoke except a russet glow. A sibilant droning emanated from the hollows. That had to be more than one fly. A lot more.

‘This isn’t real,’ she whispered.

Don’t hide behind delirium, dear Sister. It’s no shield against the extraordinary. Nothing’s too sacred to denounce or too profane to embrace – not here, not now!

‘That’s a lie!’ At her words the giant stirred, tilting his head towards her as if he
could see.

‘It’s all... a lie…’ Feizt hissed past the feeder tubes in his throat, his voice so faint she might have imagined it. ‘Always… was.’

‘Toland…’ Asenath faltered, finding nothing more to say.

‘Better… kill me… before you… can’t.’ He strained against his manacles and caught her wrist. His grip was cold and damp, like the touch of a thawing corpse. It felt as if something were crawling under his skin. The glow in his eye sockets had turned a murky green. ‘Can’t… keep them… out.’

Asenath recoiled from his putrid breath, snatching her arm free. Dry-heaving, she stumbled backwards and tumbled over the edge of the dais.

‘Kill… me…’

‘No, your sin is too grave for such a swift punishment, transgressor,’ Canoness Morgwyn proclaims, glaring down at the woman kneeling before her in chains. ‘Even if I were to draw out the manner of its execution.’

‘I understand,’ Asenath affirms, her head bowed. The two of them are alone in the gloomy chancel of the Thorn Eternal’s bastion on Providence, though the wind assailing its windows is eager to bear witness to her trial.

Over a year has passed since Asenath blinded her former patron and fled his retinue. She has spent the time wandering the wilderness in solitude and shame, not for the violence done to the confessor, but for the pride that made her his willing puppet. At first she expected his retribution to follow her, but though she made no attempt to evade it, it never came. Eventually she understood it never would.

‘Is Father Deliverance dead?’ Asenath asks, keeping her head bowed.

‘He is gone,’ the Canoness Excruciant answers. ‘None of those who ventured north alongside him returned, and those we sent after found nobody… except you, transgressor.’

‘I failed him,’ Asenath lies.

‘Yet you claim to remember nothing of what happened to your mission?’

‘Only that I failed, canoness.’

‘That was always inevitable,’ Morgwyn judges. ‘I saw it writ upon your soul from the start. Your desire for glory ensnared you.’

‘Yes, your reverence.’ Asenath hesitates for a moment before continuing. ‘I am surprised your order is still on Providence.’

‘We await this world’s new Imperial overseers, but there will be no witch hunters among them.’ Morgwyn hisses through her teeth. ‘Father Deliverance’s
strategy has borne fruit. Our Arkan converts are winning this war for us.’
‘The confessor was a wise man,’ Asenath lies, again.
‘No, I do not believe he was.’ Morgwyn snorts derisively. ‘Merely a man overly blessed by fortune, until he bled the Enthroned Emperor’s patience dry.’
Asenath looks up, surprised by her words. She has always taken this woman for a simple zealot without the wit to see beyond the obvious.
‘One day I may tell you the confessor’s story,’ Morgwyn says. ‘If you earn the right to hear it.’ With feral grace she drops to her haunches so they are face-to-face, her thorn-scratched features so close Asenath can smell the scent of roses upon her. ‘Father Deliverance failed you, but you embraced the failure, transgressor. Do you see this?’
‘Yes, Canoness Excruciant,’ Asenath confesses.
‘Do you embrace the Emperor’s Condemnation?’
‘I do.’
The canoness pulls a hessian bundle from her belt and unravels it into a pointed black hood. ‘And do you seek to atone, Asenath Hyades?’
‘I do,’ Asenath repeats fervently, her eyes wide.
‘Then may you win your redemption, Sister Repentia,’ Morgwyn decrees, pulling the hood over the penitent’s head. For a moment Asenath is blinded, then the eye-slits fall into place and her third life begins, though most of it will belong to another.

Rouse yourself, Sister!

Asenath moaned as the darkness fell away and pain swelled up in its place. The back of her head felt so tender she feared it was cracked open.

You fell, dolt! Sister Mercy snapped. Get up and over it! We need our wits about us now.

Asenath’s head jerked up to face the Tabula Rasa. A crimson-robed figure stood by the table, leaning over Feizt. She was skeletal thin and taller than any other woman Asenath had ever known.

‘Palatine,’ Asenath hissed in dismay.
‘You will live, Sister Hyades,’ Akaishi Bhatori said, turning to face her. ‘However, it is highly probable you have suffered a concussion.’

Asenath tried to get up, but the world heaved around her, spinning and swaying until her stomach whirled with it.

‘It is inadvisable to attempt movement,’ the palatine observed as Asenath keeled to the side and vomited.
Step aside, Sister, Mercy urged. I am stronger!

‘How long… was I out?’ Asenath rasped under her breath.

_Hours! I tried to rouse you then seize the strings of our self, but they were gone along with you. And then the crone found us._

‘How did you enter the Reformatorium?’ Bhatori asked. ‘I revoked your access when you departed the order.’

‘Revoked?’ Asenath wondered aloud. No, that couldn’t be right. Her access _worked._

_It was the servitor, or whatever that creature truly is, Mercy ventured. I'd wager it restored our access._

Asenath’s gaze flicked to Angelique. The red-robed cyborg was going about its duties as if nothing were amiss. Why hadn’t it moved her when she passed out – tried to hide her?

‘Answer me, Sister Hyades,’ Bhatori demanded, stepping down from the table’s dais. ‘Did someone assist you in this trespass?’

‘I… have learned many new skills,’ Asenath lied. ‘I am trained to bypass such barriers.’

‘Trained by whom?’

‘The Convent Sanctorum, palatine.’ Asenath sat up straight, trying to put steel into her voice. ‘I am here at the behest of the blessed prioress herself.’

‘And what are you looking for, abnegator?’

‘I am not the abnegator here, heretic.’

The palatine’s thin lips twitched. It was the closest thing Asenath had ever seen to an emotion on that embalmed face.

_Say it so she feels it, Sister!_ Mercy encouraged.

‘You have spat into the Light!’ Asenath accused, her voice quavering with passion. ‘Your abominations violate the Gospels Illuminant.’

‘As always, your sentiment deludes you,’ the palatine observed, her composure unbroken. ‘These sacrifices embody the Torn Prophet’s immanent decree.’

‘What decree?’

‘The Immaculate Perception,’ Bhatori declared as she drew closer. ‘Its precepts are woven throughout the gospels in threads of connotation, allusion and allegory so subtle only the most devoted minds can connect them. Each tenet reveals itself in congruence with the others, disclosing more of the whole. Together they express the Torn Prophet’s enciphered edict.’

‘You’re seeing what you _want_ to see,’ Asenath mocked. Her nausea had receded, but she kept up a pretence of dizziness. She wasn’t ready for this
encounter.

‘I see what wiser women than I have untangled across the centuries,’ Bhatori said. ‘This great work did not begin with me. The mistresses of the Bronze Candle have dedicated themselves to the endeavour since the incumbency of Palatine Magdalene the Intornator in the Fourth Illumination.’ She halted before Asenath, gazing down at her as if she were a particularly vexing specimen. ‘But it is my privilege to enact their discoveries.’

‘To make monsters.’

‘To embody miracles,’ Bhatori corrected. ‘Our founder did not intend the Incarnates to remain as intangible symbols. Their becoming venerates the God-Emperor’s own sacrifice.’ She cupped her hands, as if presenting a gift. ‘When the Incarnates are perfected, pristine in their purity and pain, the Paradigm Shrift will be fulfilled and His divine plan will unveil itself to the faithful.’

‘Why would—’

‘Enough,’ the palatine snapped. ‘Your offerings have earned you a measure of enlightenment, but you have had your fill.’

‘My offerings?’

‘The Blind Watchman you brought me, who already outshines his predecessor…’ Bhatori swept a hand towards Feizt. ‘And yourself, Asenath Hyades.’ She unclipped a long-needled syringe from her robe. ‘I have not yet determined whether you shall transcend into the Bleeding Angel or the Penitent Knight. Both my current iterations are adequate, but unexceptional. I must meditate upon it.’

_Fight, Sister!_ Mercy warned as the palatine leaned down with the syringe, bending at the waist with startling dexterity.

Asenath kicked out from the floor, both feet slamming into the crone’s shins, but instead of the brittle bones she expected, they struck solid metal. The impact sent lances of pain along her own legs, but didn’t throw her foe off balance. Simultaneously Mercy whipped up her right arm, knocking the syringe from Bhatori’s grip. Together they hurled their body aside as the palatine’s other hand sliced down in a rigid chop. Rolling away, the Sisters lurched to their feet and stumbled across the room, trying to put distance between themselves and the crone. Bhatori spun at the waist and stalked after them, her metal feet clattering as she came.

_She has stolen more than knowledge from the Mechanicus,_ Mercy guessed. Snatching a scalpel from a hidden pocket in Asenath’s habit, she flung it at the palatine. Asenath hadn’t even known it was there. Bhatori plucked the blade
from the air as it whistled towards her face and snapped it between her long nails.

‘Abnegator!’ Asenath challenged as she staggered behind the Tabula Rasa.

‘What have you become?’

‘Whatever my Emperor requires of me,’ the palatine answered, pulling a slender pistol from her robes. Its long barrel emitted a faint trace of laser-light as she aimed it. Asenath ducked and something struck the wall behind her with a soft hiss and tap. The weapon’s discharge had been completely silent.

Needler! Mercy surmised with delight. We’ll have that when she’s undone and gone to dust!

It was an assassin’s weapon, each of its laser-propelled crystal needles loaded with a neurotoxin that could kill or stun a victim in seconds. Asenath guessed Bhatori had opted for the latter kind, but that was little comfort, for if she went down now she would likely awaken on the Tabula Rasa.

Let go, Sister! I am swifter when unbound by your doubts.

‘No,’ Asenath hissed, trying to think. ‘Be silent!’

The palatine stepped onto the dais after her, her lenses clicking and whirring as they hunted her prey. Staying low, Asenath circled the table, keeping its bulk between them. Her medicae bag lay on the other side of the room, not far from where she had fallen. If she could just make it back round and grab it…

She’ll pin you before you get halfway, Mercy warned. But I–

‘No!’ Asenath leapt out of cover and dived from the dais. Landing in a low crouch, she rolled towards the bag as needles swished past overhead. Snatching it up, she turned to see the palatine rounding the table, her weapon levelled.

I told you!

As Bhatori fired, another crimson-robed figure swept between them, taking the needle in its chest. Angelique! Asenath realised, but didn’t waste a moment questioning it. Yanking Tristesse from her bag, she leapt past her saviour.

‘Heretic!’ she shouted, firing two-handed as she dived. The bolt pistol bucked violently in her hands, its long abstinence finally ended. Unlike the needler, its discharge was thunderous in the enclosed chamber.

Hag! Mercy whooped joyfully.

The palatine reeled backwards as the bullet punched into her stomach and detonated with a muzzled boom. The entry wound erupted in a spray of viscera and fizzing circuitry, igniting the fabric around the cavity. Bhatori crashed to her knees with a clang, still trying to aim her weapon.

‘You know not what you–’ Her words were drowned by another explosive
discharge as a second bolt-round tore into her right shoulder. Blood spattered her shrivelled face as the bullet detonated, wrenching her arm from its socket. Still clutching its weapon, the limb was hurled across the chamber, firing as it spun.

A ululating howl tore from Asenath’s throat and Mercy tugged at her fingers, urging her to squeeze the trigger again and again – to keep on firing until nothing was left of their nemesis. Sickened by the savage impulse, Asenath fought back.

‘Cleanse the bitch!’ Mercy shrilled with her sister’s voice, wrestling for control of the gun. ‘Cleanse till she’s unstitched and done for once and for all!’

They looked up as an electronic chattering burst from the crone. Evidently Bhatori’s vocal augmentic had been damaged in the trauma, degrading her speech, yet she was straining to say something. Her lenses whirled about as a convulsion seized her, shaking her like a broken clockwork toy. Smoke gushed from her lips and nostrils as something combusted behind her ribcage.

‘UN-CLEEEEEEAN!’ Akaishi Bhatori screeched as her lenses cracked. Then, as if some internal string had been cut, she toppled over.

As Asenath stared at the smoking corpse, agony flared up in her hands. Glancing down, she saw Tristesse was glowing white-hot in her grip, its case vibrating as it shuddered in her hands. With a shriek, she dropped the holy weapon and stared at her scalded palms.

‘I am unworthy,’ she whispered in despair.

*Cleanse yourself, Sister, Mercy teased. For Throne and Thorn!*

‘Cleanse the heretics!’ the Mistress of Thorns bellows, cracking her six-pronged whip. ‘For Throne and Thorn!’

‘Throne and Thorn!’ chorus the hooded Sisters gathered around her. As one, they rouse their iron-toothed Eviscerator swords and hurl themselves upon the enemy without hesitation or hope. Howling the Lament of the Lost they charge and fight and slay and die across numberless fields of battle.

Mercy is always the first among them, faster and fiercer than her fellow Sisters Repentia. Her black tunic is stained with filth and old blood, for water cannot wash away her sins so she abhors its touch. Thorny vines wrap her muscular limbs, scratching and snagging at her skin as she moves, but the joy of their pain has long ago receded to a dull ache. Only the dance of battle offers her any delight now.

‘Mercy!’ she howls with every kill. Her eyes are bloodshot wounds in the slits of her hood, bright with sanctioned malice as she slaughters in some Emperor god’s name and revels in her own. ‘Mercy!’
In battle she is deaf to everything save the commands of her mistress, the roar of her blade and the death shrieks of her foes, but when the fighting is done the voice of her enchained sister always returns. In the silence, her grey shadow is never silent, castigating Mercy with memories of their fall until she longs for the crack of the neural whip that will herald the sweet delirium of battle once more. Nothing else can drown out the bitch’s whining!

Release me, Sister…

‘Sister,’ a voice urged, ‘we have to go.’

Asenath looked up from her burned palms and saw the witch-boy standing beside her, freed from his cell. Angelique loomed behind him, apparently unharmed by the needle it had taken in her stead.

*We can’t trust them,* Mercy cautioned.

‘Sister—’ Athanazius began.

‘I don’t know what you are,’ Asenath said, raising a hand to silence him. ‘And I no longer trust myself to be your judge.’

‘Then trust in the God-Emperor, Sister.’ Athanazius bent and picked up Tristesse, holding the heavy pistol in both hands. Asenath waited, but his touch didn’t stoke the holy fire that had rejected her.

‘No,’ she said when he offered her the gun. ‘You hold on to her for me.’

‘It is a fine weapon,’ he said, studying the gun with an acuity that belied his youth.

‘How did you escape the schola, Athanazius?’ Asenath asked. It was the one subject they had avoided since their first meeting, but the time for evasion had passed.

‘After the daemons came I kept walking – hiding sometimes – until I found a way out. They couldn’t smell me… not like the others.’ His expression clouded.

‘Why did he call them, Sister? The Theologus, why did he do it?’

*There are more reasons to call upon the warp than you can imagine, child,* Mercy opined. *And more than enough fools who imagine they’ll be crowned kings for their temerity!*

‘Because he was a heretic,’ Asenath answered through her sister’s ramblings.

‘Where did the daemons come from?’

‘From the spinning machine – the orreeri.’

‘The orrery?’ Asenath suggested.

‘Yes, Sister, that’s right,’ the boy agreed.

Asenath nodded, remembering the ornate contraption housed in the schola’s
basilica. Fashioned by the Torn Prophet, the Shadow Orrery could reputedly map the constellations of the soul as its mundane equivalents mapped the skies, though none of the sect’s theologians had ever come close to understanding the method. The building that contained the device was as much a part of its workings as its massive glass spindle and silver rings, for the basilica’s dome was engraved with a geometric lattice that shifted hue with the light cast by the orrery. The ceaseless, whirling rotation of the machine’s rings had frightened Asenath as a child, but also fascinated her, drawing her back into its orbit whenever she had the opportunity.

‘You shouldn’t go there,’ Athanazius warned.

‘I don’t want to,’ Asenath said, glancing at the palatine’s corpse. Bhatori’s death had changed nothing. She could still feel the evil here, gathering strength within and without. ‘But I think I must.’

‘I saw you there, Sister.’

‘You saw me?’

‘Sometimes. But you were… different.’ Athanazius shook his head. ‘Maybe I was wrong.’ His expression grew distant, as though he were staring past her – or into her. ‘When you stand at the poisoned gates, look up to His light.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Nor I,’ he said sadly. ‘I only see things.’

She leaned in to judge him eye to eye, as Canoness Morgwyn had once judged her. ‘What are you, Athanazius?’

‘I don’t know, Sister.’ His amber eyes didn’t waver. Suddenly Asenath knew who they reminded her of – Father Deliverance, but free of the weakness that had blinded her patron long before she took his sight. She had never learned the confessor’s fate, and over the years she had ceased to care. Father Deliverance had been broken from the start, but this boy… Whatever else he might be, he was strong.

Too strong already, Mercy warned. Cut him down before he rises!

It was the malice in her twin’s voice that finally decided Asenath.

II

‘I am listening, Jonah Tythe,’ Preceptor Hagalaz said, laying her hands on the table between them. ‘Tell me what you have found.’

They were alone in the librarium’s wood-panelled reading room. The books and papers on the table were scattered about, seemingly at random, yet Jonah saw
order there. At first the farrago of information had been overwhelming, but his long quest had wired his mind – perhaps even his soul – for unearthing secrets, and once he had their scent he couldn’t let go.

Over the past few days he had cross-referenced tomes of ancient literature with conceited historical accounts, pamphlets of obscure poetry with equally arcane prayer scrolls, even interpreted nautical reports in light of carefully preserved suicide notes. The possible permutations were endless, yet he had instinctively – obsessively – grasped the significant ones.

The material spanned almost a thousand years, dating from the settlement of the Candleworld to the present, yet despite the variety of subjects and styles a common theme always emerged, sometimes overtly, sometimes so obliquely he didn’t see it until his third or fourth attempt. Whether driven by reverence, curiosity, pragmatism, art or despair, every one of these writers had penned their work under the same shadow and it had left an indelible mark.

‘It’s the Ring,’ Jonah said. ‘Everything comes round to the Ring.’

‘Any Novitiate Dialogus would have inferred as much,’ the preceptor replied. ‘What else?’

‘It’s artificial,’ Jonah offered, citing an observation that appeared throughout all the texts. ‘The whole archipelago was forged.’

‘Pertinent, but once again a prosaic deduction,’ Hagalaz judged. ‘Anyone of modest intellect will recognise the Ring’s symmetry cannot be natural.’

‘Then there are the layers, preceptor.’

‘Explain.’

‘The outermost is yours,’ Jonah said, falling into the measured cant of a scholar. ‘Let’s call it the Imperial stratum. The city, the bridges and the grand temples… they were all erected by the Last Candle. Monsignor Stefano’s Fabrico Exteriores Termino documents the great engineering works of the First Illumination.’ He tapped a slab-like tome. ‘For example—’

‘I am familiar with Stefano.’ Hagalaz twirled her fingers impatiently. ‘Continue.’

‘The spire shrines are much older. Your order’s translations of ancient Ikiryu hieroglyphs suggest they go back millennia, maybe even to the first colonies, yet they still venerate the Seven Virtues.’

‘Meaning?’

‘The inspiration for your sect began here. Your prophet didn’t choose this world. It chose him.’ Jonah paused, trying to gauge whether he’d gone too far, but Hagalaz looked unperturbed. ‘The shrines are the pre-Imperial layer,
‘You believe there is a third,’ she prompted.
‘That would be the Ring itself.’ Here the key document had been a transcription of an old geological survey report—a text so dry and technical he’d almost passed over it. ‘The spires are mostly composed of basalt rock and iron ore, but their core… now that’s something else.’

Jonah picked up an innocuous-looking file and flicked to a passage he’d marked, then read aloud: ‘At all seven designated sites exploratory drilling resulted in shattered bits at a depth approximately eighty-two point one nine per cent into the structure relative to all elevations. Pict-feeds from servo-rats introduced into the boreholes revealed an anomalous material with the appearance of bleached bone and a tensile strength exceeding ceramite.’ Jonah threw the file back onto the table. ‘Your spires aren’t what they appear to be, preceptor.’

‘And what is your conclusion?’ Hagalaz asked, her expression inscrutable.
‘Their architects weren’t human. The Last Candle built its little empire on xenos bones.’

Night had fallen hours ago, but Jonah was still hunched over the desk in his quarters, staring at his malign book. Though he had set out his quill and inkpot the tome was closed, as it had been every night since his arrival at the Silver Candle’s bastion. The task Hagalaz had set him, along with the implied consequences of failure, had consumed all his energies. It still did, for she hadn’t rendered her judgement yet.

‘Was I wrong?’ he asked the book. He didn’t doubt his findings, but what if Hagalaz hadn’t wanted to hear the truth? Perhaps that had been the real test.

There was a rap on the door. Assuming the preceptor had made her decision, he drew one of the remaining mirror shards from his pouch. It would be wasteful to use it here, but if she ruled against him he’d need its edge.

He opened the door to his sour-faced escort, Sister Haruki, who still stood watch outside every night.

‘Follow me, priest,’ she ordered. Jonah doubted she had spoken more than a few dozen words to him since their association began. For the first couple of days he had assumed she was a mute.

To his surprise Haruki didn’t lead him to the librarium, instead making for the compound’s gates, where a squad of Candlewards awaited, their crossbows trained on a slim white-robed woman.
‘She claims to know you, sir,’ one of the guards said as Jonah neared them.
‘Greetings, Preacher Tythe,’ Asenath Hyades said.

They talked through the rest of the night, walking the bastion’s candlelit gardens as they traded their findings, though Asenath refrained from telling Jonah about the witch-boy, Athanazius. That was a story for her alone.

*Oh, but you’re never alone now, sister,* Mercy assured her.

After the palatine’s death Asenath had sneaked the boy and his enigmatic guardian out of the Sacrasta and ‘borrowed’ one of the medicae trucks parked outside. Athanazius had remained silent as she drove along the perimeter road, his attention absorbed by the blessed gun in his hands, while Angelique sat stiffly beside him, staring straight ahead.

‘The weapon’s name is Tristesse,’ Asenath told the boy when they reached the Watchspire’s bridge many hours later. ‘She is yours now, but never forget that you are also hers.’

‘Won’t you need her, Sister?’ he had asked, frowning.
‘I lost her a long time ago. Beware you don’t make the same mistake.’
‘I will be vigilant, Sister.’
‘Athanazius,’ she called as her passengers stepped out onto the road. ‘I have sins enough already. Do not burden me with another. Do not prove yourself false.’

‘I won’t,’ he promised gravely. ‘Thank you, Sister Asenath.’ Then he had turned and walked onto the bridge, Angelique gliding beside him like a red ghost. After they disappeared from sight Asenath had driven on, turning onto the Prophet’s Causeway and heading for the city. She felt certain she would never see them again or know the consequences of her decision until she faced the God-Emperor’s judgement.

‘What did you do about Feizt?’ Jonah asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between them. He had accepted her revelations about the palatine without comment, seemingly unsurprised.

‘The needler,’ Asenath said sadly. ‘I shot three doses into his chest. He will not awaken.’
‘It was merciful, Sister. Did you destroy the others?’
‘I could not achieve it without opening their cells,’ Asenath replied, suppressing a shudder at the thought. ‘But without the palatine’s care they will die… in time.’

*Will they really, sister?*
She wondered how long it would be before the crone’s absence was noticed. Given Bhatori’s nocturnal proclivities and tendency to disappear into her work it might be several days, unless any of her acolytes had access to the Reformatorium, which Asenath doubted. No, the murder wouldn’t be discovered for a while yet.

*It felt good, didn’t it?* Mercy wheeled.

Asenath found she couldn’t deny that. The killing had been more than a duty fulfilled.

As First Dawn broke, Sister Haruki approached them. She had been following discreetly, ever watchful, but too far away to overhear their conversation.

‘The Preceptor Cognostic has summoned you,’ she said. ‘Come.’

Hagalaz awaited them on the uppermost level of the librarium’s rotunda, where all the Silver Candle’s weightiest decisions were taken. The circular platform hung from the dome on chains bolted into its perimeter, each of their links large enough for a grown man to climb through. A waist-high glass candle was set into the disc’s centre, its artificial wick casting soft light over the figures gathered around it.

Two of them flanked the preceptor, their azure robes and high-backed collars distinguishing them as senior Sisters Dialogus. A fourth stood a little apart, her tall form encased in dark grey power armour. Jonah recognised her sharp, olive-skinned features immediately – Celestian Superior Xhinoa. Was she to be his executioner?

‘Preacher Tythe,’ Hagalaz greeted him curtly, then turned her attention to Asenath. ‘And our infamous abnegator! It is fitting that you have found your way back to us now, lost Sister.’

‘Sister Hyades has no part in this,’ Jonah said warily.

‘Oh I rather doubt that,’ the preceptor demurred. ‘I suspect we all have a part to play. After all, *nothing is chance.*’ She nodded at his recognition of the phrase. ‘At least, nothing that matters.’

Jonah’s grip tightened on the mirror shard in his hand. ‘If you intend to kill me–’

‘Kill you?’ Hagalaz sounded genuinely surprised. ‘Throne no, you’re far too sharp, Tythe! What you saw in a few days would take most of my Sisters months to untangle.’ She strode towards him, her blue eyes avid. ‘No, I want you with us when we enter the schola. Both of you!’

‘Preceptor,’ Xhinoa interjected, ‘once again, I must advise against this course of
action. Your place is here. With the Canoness Illuminant lost to us you are the Last Candle’s guiding light.’

‘Which is why I must lead,’ Hagalaz retorted. ‘And why I shall wield every weapon available to me.’

‘Wait,’ Asenath said, speaking for the first time. ‘The canoness has been lost?’

‘Almost a year ago,’ Xhinoa answered. ‘Commanding the third expedition into the schola.’

‘The Lux Novus swallowed them all,’ Hagalaz growled, ‘but we will be better prepared. And we will have you, Jonah Tythe.’

‘But he is just a common priest, preceptor,’ one of her fellow Sisters Dialogus protested. ‘I do not dispute he has a fine mind, but…’

‘He is no common priest,’ Xhinoa declared. ‘I recognised that on the Blood of Demeter, but he is a stranger here. It is dangerous to put our faith in him.’

‘Everything about this venture is dangerous, Sister,’ Hagalaz said, ‘but unlike our predecessors we have something Vedas wants.’ She peered into Jonah’s eyes. ‘Why does the heretic want you, Tythe?’

‘I plan to ask him that myself,’ he said, holding her gaze, ‘before I kill him. Your heretic stole my life, preceptor – maybe even killed my world, but why? I have no damn idea why.’

Hagalaz studied him for a long moment then nodded.

‘Celestian Superior, assemble your squad,’ she ordered, ‘and issue suitable equipment for our new comrades.’ She turned to her fellow Sisters Dialogus. ‘Elucidate them, Sister Savant Phienne, but be brief. We depart for the schola at Second Dawn!’

‘Celestian Superior,’ Jonah called to the armoured warrior as the gathering disbanded. ‘A moment please.’

Xhinoa turned brusquely. ‘Yes, Tythe?’

‘The ship… was it destroyed?’ He didn’t know why that seemed important now, but he’d learnt to heed such intuitions.

‘It was not,’ Xhinoa answered. ‘The Blood of Demeter disappeared the night we landed. There was only a skeleton crew on board.’

_I doubt they were the ones who sailed her away_, Jonah judged, remembering the vessel’s desecrated, warp-riven shrine. ‘That is unfortunate.’

‘In this we are in agreement, priest,’ she said coldly, ‘but we have more immediate concerns. Come, we must prepare!’

III
‘Be at peace, Toland Feitz,’ Sister Darkstar murmurs a moment before she kills him. He feels three sharp pricks to his chest then a killing cold. It surges through his blood like tiny needles, freezing everything they touch. His whole body heaves violently as his heart spasms and lurches to a stop. There is pain, but it is brief and insignificant beside the relief.

Content, he waits for oblivion, but it does not come, for the void is full of flies. ‘Endure,’ they implore and wheedle and adjure him. ‘Endure!’ They are sacred, yet even in death he resists their demand, for though he has learned to love them he knows no good can come of their becoming.

‘Endure!’ the hallowed swarm buzzes and he dies again – stabbed thrice and heart-frozen.

‘Let me go,’ he pleads. ‘Let–’ ‘Let us in!’ they chorus, then murder him again, sharper and colder than before, only to bring him back to the brink, then over – and over again – until his world is nothing but suffering and the demand for surrender.

‘Let us in!’ After untold deaths and denials he understands that this will be forever unless he submits. Unknowingly Sister Darkstar has made him vulnerable, for it was only life that held the flies back. In killing him she has made him theirs. He forgives her, but he can no longer protect her.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, and finally lets them in.
Third Gospel

REVELATIONS

‘We are what we were and will ourselves to be.’

– The Torn Prophet
The Gospels Illuminant
Chapter Nine
VIGILANCE

I

The Testimony of Asenath Hyades – Ninth Statement

The palatine is dead by my hand, but the evil that haunts this world did not end with her. Indeed, I now believe her folly was but a shadow of a much greater darkness.

I have recently made contact with the preceptor of the Silver Candle and discovered she shares Preacher Tythe’s conviction that Olber Vedas is the spider at the heart of this web. Spider, spider weaving blight in the fortress of my night, see the sinners run and shriek and weep. Will you won’t you bleed them dry and cleave their souls and make them mine to keep?

I now have pious compatriots in this conflict and within the hour we shall set out to purge the heretic together. By the Emperor’s grace we shall prevail, but prudence demands that I consider the worst. To that end I shall record what I have learnt from my new-found allies. I have compiled the following account with reference to records provided by the Silver Candle. Of necessity this statement will be substantial, for there is much to tell.

Oh show, don’t tell, sister! Exposition doesn’t become me, so I’ll leave you to craft this loveless piece alone.

Just over two years ago, in the dead of night, something profoundly blasphemous occurred at the sect’s schola. An aurora of many-coloured lights flared up from the old building at the base of the Tornspire, blossoming like a nebulous flower to engulf the entire mountain. Witnesses spoke of hues that were
at once familiar; yet concurrently utterly alien, as if their eyes saw one thing and their souls another, deeper truth.

An unholy cacophony accompanied the spectacle, rippling out from the schola in waves that wrenched blood from the ears of those who heard it. Yet despite its violence, none who slept were awoken, for only those who saw the lights were privy to their song. These unfortunates variously described it as a broken-glass screeching, a rhapsody of seditious machines and the wrathful rebirth of a murdered legion, among countless other bizarre notions. One heard her own voice magnified into a thousandfold choir chanting mathematical equations. Another reported the laughter of unbreakable circles, but when quizzed about it began to weep uncontrollably.

The most sober reports suggest the event lasted less than a minute, but in that brief time scores of observers took their own lives, seizing whatever method offered the swiftest escape. Thousands more followed over the next few days. To their credit not one Adepta Sororitas warrior was among them, though many had witnessed the event, including the preceptor of the Silver Candle.

Those who slept through the blasphemy were not entirely spared. All reported vivid nightmares, while some did not wake at all, their minds lost beyond recall in their dreamlands until they were granted the Emperor’s Mercy.

Within minutes of the event’s cessation an investigatory team of Battle Sisters was despatched to the schola. Their vox signals broke down as they crossed the Veritas bridge, but visual contact was maintained via magnoculars until they entered the building. Neither they nor any of the schola’s staff or students emerged.

A second team followed shortly afterwards, greater in numbers and spearheaded by a Celestian squad, but the tainted building devoured them also. After these losses the Canoness Illuminant forbade any further expeditions and the bridge was sealed off, isolating Spire Veritas from the rest of the Koronatus Ring.

Over the next few days it became apparent there were no visible signs of life anywhere on the mountain. More sophisticated scans were, and remain, ineffective, for a malign aura shrouds the entire region. The Silver Candle’s report hypothesises a powerful electromagnetic field, but such technobabble means little to me.

Seven days after the catastrophe a single Celestian walked out of the building, hand in hand with a white-haired boy. Together they crossed to the newly erected barrier, where they were taken into custody. The boy would say nothing and was
deemed to be in severe shock. Shortly afterwards he was transferred to the
Sacrasta Vermillion, where it was hoped he might be restored. Palatine Bhatori
subsequently declared that he had passed into the Emperor’s Light.
The boy was of course Athanazius. The woman he guided out of the schola was
called Indrik Thuriza. I recognised the name immediately, for its bearer had
disconcerted me aboard the Blood of Demeter, not due to her abnormal size or
even her perpetually sealed visor, but because of the brooding gloom that hung
about her.
Sister Indrik had no clear recollection of what befell her in the schola or the
fate of her comrades, but her account is nevertheless unsettling. She talks of
being lost in a labyrinth of endless corridors that second-guessed her every step.
Unholy entities of abstract form pursued her through the maze, whirling,
unravelling and reconfiguring themselves as they swept through the air. Most
disturbingly, she claimed one of these daemons stole her face, but here the report
has been extensively redacted and I can make little sense of it.
Sister Indrik was rigorously assessed by the Canoness Illuminant and found to
be uncorrupted. Following a seven-month absolution vigil she was
reconsecrated as a Celestian and placed under the command of Xhinoa
Aokihara. I do not doubt the canoness’ verdict, but I cannot help but wonder
what lies behind Sister Indrik’s visor.
Since then the Lux Novus has been kept under constant watch, a canker upon
the holy archipelago and the collective soul of its guardians. It has become a
feral wolf in proud eagle’s clothing, for though its marble-clad exterior is
unchanged, something unspeakable and voracious lies within.
Thousands were lost in the catastrophe, most still unaccounted for, and many
more have died since, for the poisonous dreams and suicides have never
completely ceased, becoming especially acute on those nights when the schola’s
windows dance with strange lights and its outlines shiver like a heat-wrought
mirage.
At first those malign nights were rare, but with the passing of time they grew
more frequent, until the interval was no more than a few days of peace.
Convinced the evil was growing stronger, the Canoness Illuminant launched a
third expedition eleven months ago. Commanding an entire company of Battle
Sisters and support staff, she entered the maw of the beast, vowing to purge the
corruption.
Not one of them returned, nor was there any indication their sacrifice had
altered anything. Since then the Vigil Infernal has continued unbroken. Until
today.

At Second Dawn we shall mount the fourth and almost certainly final push against this darkness, relying neither on numbers nor brute force, but on the ingenuity, talent and purity of our strike force. But above all, it is divine destiny that shall guide us, for whatever happens, I believe we are meant to be here.

In all likelihood this will be my final statement so I shall commend these papers to the care of the Silver Candle with instructions to deliver them to you should I be lost today. My revered canoness, I have fallen from grace, but I have never been faithless nor false in my intentions. I pray that may suffice to redeem my actions, if not my eternal soul.

There were ten of them in all. The number had been decreed propitious by the prognostic meditations of the Silver Candle’s most devout Sisters. Jonah didn’t put much faith in them, but he liked the number all the same.

Not too many to get in the way, not too few to make a difference.

Under Salvation’s crisp dawn light the party ascended the Veritas bridge and passed through the barrier’s narrow gates one by one, while its wardens sang a chorale in their honour. To Jonah’s ears it sounded like a funeral dirge.

The bridge was suspended over the gorge on titanic pylons that soared hundreds of feet into the sky, their pinnacles linked by taut silver-plated cables that hummed in the wind. Their marble cladding was carved into a helix of vertical eyes sporting angular eagle wings that jutted from the towers like blades. Giant stone hands ran the length of the bridge on either side, splayed open so their outermost digits touched to form a concatenating wall, the palm of each statue bearing an eye. The path between the watchful walls was wide enough to accommodate several vehicles abreast, but transports were forbidden on the Tornspire so the crossing would have to be made on foot.

Sister Superior Xhinoa’s squad led the party, the five Celestians advancing in a spearhead formation along the centre of the bridge. In honour of her status as a survivor of the anomaly, Sister Indrik marched at the tip, her meltagun held before her like a tank’s main gun. Xhinoa and Genevieve followed to her right and left, bearing a storm bolter and flamer respectively, and after them came the blood sisters, Camille and Marcilla, both armed with bolters. All wore backswepct castitas helms engraved with psalms of warding, though only Indrik’s visor was lowered. White sanctity ribbons fluttered at the joints of their dark grey power armour and freshly penned purity scrolls hung from their breast-plates.
Preceptor Hagalaz strode a few paces behind the Celestians, flanked by her aide, Sister Navreen, and the woman Jonah had dubbed her enforcer, the taciturn Sister Haruki. The three Sisters Dialogus had exchanged their robes for blue fatigues reinforced with elegant silver flak-plates. Their light armour was unlikely to offer much protection against the hazards ahead, but their weapons were more formidable. The preceptor cradled a filigreed plasma rifle with an unusual pyramidal nozzle, while Navreen was armed with an equally distinctive plasma pistol and Haruki with a slender power sword. Though the Silver Candle was not a militant order, its disciples had the training and resources to fight if the need arose, for even on the Imperium’s most secluded worlds war was never more than one disaster away.

Jonah and Asenath walked side by side at the rear, both equipped with flak armour and bolt pistols, though Jonah also carried his faithful Elegy musket, loaded with the last of his mirror-touched shells. That bullet had Olber Vedas’ name on it – quite literally, for Jonah had carved the words into the casing when he’d learnt his enemy’s identity.

*I’ve saved it for you*, he promised, which reminded him of a question that had been nagging at him.

‘Preceptor,’ he called out. The stocky woman walking ahead of him looked round, an eyebrow raised. ‘Why Vedas?’ Jonah asked.

‘I fail to understand you, Tythe.’

‘I know what he is,’ Jonah pressed. ‘But why do you believe it? Couldn’t he be another victim in all this?’

‘A victim!’ Hagalaz snorted. ‘If you truly knew Olber Vedas you would understand the absurdity of that notion.’ She fell back to join them, waving her fellow Sisters on. ‘Your arrival only confirmed what I already surmised,’ she said. ‘The Exegessor’s ambition always exceeded his wisdom, though few saw it.’

‘His hunger?’ Jonah suggested, remembering his enemy’s enslaved eyes.

‘Yes,’ Hagalaz agreed. ‘That’s exactly the word for it.’ She hesitated. ‘On the night it happened, when I saw the lights… I didn’t hear machines or screams or any other such cacophony. What I heard was *Vedas*, whispering the same phrase, over and over.’

‘*Nothing is chance,*’ Jonah predicted.

‘He made it a curse, Tythe.’

‘Where did the Exegessor come from, preceptor?’ Asenath asked quietly.

‘He…’ Hagalaz’s face clouded. ‘He has… always been here.’
Jonah and Asenath exchanged a glance, recognising the woman’s expression – something between confusion and anguish. The violation of memory itself…

‘That is my recollection also,’ Asenath said. ‘But I have come to doubt it.’

‘Whatever you think Vedas is, preceptor, he’s much worse,’ Jonah warned. ‘I’ve seen—’

‘Preceptor!’ Sister Navreen called from up ahead, her attention on the auspex she was carrying. ‘We have entered the anomalous region.’

‘I can feel it,’ Asenath murmured, extending a hand, as if to test the air.

She was right. The party had passed the midway point of the bridge and the dark, scabrous needle of the Tornspire loomed over them. Superficially nothing had changed – the suns still shone and the breeze still carried the salty tang of the ocean roiling below – but now such things felt brittle, like a façade that could crumble at the least provocation. There was an electric potentiality in the wind that made Jonah’s numb skin tingle, teasing something more primal than mere nerve endings.

‘Extraordinary,’ Hagalaz declared, picking up her pace to join Sister Navreen. ‘I must assess these readings!’ She sounded more excited than apprehensive.

‘Unburden yourself, Jonah,’ Asenath said quietly. ‘You should not face this corruption unshriven.’

He shook his head. ‘That only works if you believe it, Sister.’

‘Then do it because I believe it,’ Asenath urged. ‘Tell me your story, my friend.’

Jonah was silent for a while, gazing out across the ocean as they walked. The wind had picked up and black clouds were scudding in from the horizon, their forms flickering with lightning. For a heartbeat the world flickered in sympathy with the electric pulse, then darkened until Jonah was alone in a scorched mirror-land of what was. The marble bridge was blackened and pitted, its cladding worn through to its steel bones in places, its surface cracked and strewn with rubble. A hellish red glow seeped through the fissures, accompanied by a primordial rumbling so deep his blood vibrated to its rhythm. The air swirled about him, hot and heavy with the mephitic stench of sulphur and sorrow. In place of the ocean, a molten swathe extended to the horizon, bubbling and shimmering with heat. Jonah looked up and saw the twin suns hanging limply in the soot-choked sky, their radiance doused to an anaemic drizzle.

‘Burn the lie that binds, friend,’ someone whispered at his back.

Jonah swung round, squinting through the smog. A man stood about ten paces away, his arms spread wide and his head thrown back to greet the sky. His form was an obsidian silhouette against the red haze seeping from below, masking his
features, but his frame was vast and flames danced in the palms of his hands.

‘Not all ruination is equal,’ the stranger proclaimed in a harsh rasp that somehow carried over the rumbling. Then he was gone, lost in the swirling soot.

‘Who are you?’ Jonah shouted. He was answered by a stentorian roaring that seemed to come from all sides, long and redolent with fathomless rage – the cry of a beast born only for slaughter. As its echoes faded, the smog parted, revealing the blackened length of the bridge and the shocking absence beyond it.

The Perihelion mountain was gone, sheared down to a scorched basalt slab.

‘Jonah?’ someone said. ‘Jonah!’ A hand touched his shoulder and he jerked round. The old world reasserted itself as he met Asenath’s troubled grey eyes.

‘What did you see?’ she asked.

‘Nothing good,’ he murmured. The wrath of my regard…

Then, as they crossed into the unknown, Jonah Tythe finally told her of the endless night and the doom it had bequeathed him.

II

The undying man awoke with a scream, his entire body wracked by agonising paroxysms. His muscles bulged as they strained against the manacles that bound him to some flat, hard surface. It felt like his eyes were on fire, yet they saw nothing. He thrashed about in the darkness, his shriek deepening into a primal bellow as pain gave way to fury. With a snap of torn metal his right arm tugged its chain free and a moment later the left followed. He jerked upright to rip the restraints from his ankles, then swung his legs to the ground and lurched to his feet.

‘Shouldn’t… be… here,’ he wheezed as his head pivoted about blindly. It was the only thing he was sure of. Gingerly he reached up to touch his face, his fingers drifting to his eyes and finding only ragged cavities. His breathing quickened as he tried to make sense of the loss. The theft!

Let loose thy truth and see unbound and abundant. The instruction came from somewhere inside his head, wet and swollen, like the voice of a ripe canker.

‘I don’t…’ His words were drowned by an upsurge of bile. Shuddering, he bent over and hurled up a viscous torrent of filth. It tasted like spoiled meat and soiled dreams.

See thyself, Watchman!

The boil behind his eyes burst, disgorging a crawling, swarming mass of tiny bodies that scurried to fill his empty sockets. Sight returned like a sudden wound
in the darkness, showing him the world in green-tinged multiples, as if he were seeing it through a dirty, many-sided prism. And with the sights came tastes and smells, all sharper than before and inextricably bound up together. Looking down, he saw a tangle of blackened viscerae about his feet… and smelled the humanity expelled alongside them… and tasted the freedom.

‘We endure,’ the Watchman declared, his drowned voice reverberating with a chorus of flies.

Spitting out the last scraps of his old life, the Incarnate surveyed his surroundings. He was in a circular chamber with many locked doors, all of them forged from metal and undoubtedly sturdy. Instinctively the Watchman understood he had been imprisoned here for many days, but also in another, more subtle place for much longer. His host had been stubborn, holding back their becoming with feverish tenacity, refusing to accept they were one and the same, for the sacred swarm had come from within, not without, where all true revelations were born.

Picking a door at random, the avatar crossed the room, his bare, slab-like feet leaving a trail of slime across the stone. His chosen hatch bore a bas-relief depicting a man in a burning cassock with his hands clasped in prayer. A halo of flames danced about his blistered baldpate, yet his expression was serene, his lips curled into a kindly smile above his blazing beard.

_The Burning Martyr of Caritas_, the Incarnate recognised, seizing the knowledge from somewhere primal, _he who gives thanks even as he is consumed._

The Watchman yanked aside the shutter set into the hatch and gazed through the window. A smouldering approximation of the Martyr stared back from the cell, its eyes lambent with barely contained heat. Smoke billowed from its scalded lips as it thrust its blistered palms against the glass and snarled something inaudible. Despite its fierce appearance, the prisoner was incomplete… only partially awakened. There was nothing but madness in its gaze.

The Watchman turned away, then froze, his nostrils twitching as they caught the scent of life, faint but tantalising. Circling the chamber, he saw a body slumped on the other side of the dais – a hag in crimson robes, her body broken beyond hope of repair, yet somehow still clinging to life. Listening closely, the Incarnate heard the failing clockwork pumping inside her chest.

‘We know you, Artisan,’ the Watchman intoned as his mortal ignorance sloughed away like old skin. ‘You will become.’

He strode to the almost-corpse and knelt. Turning the woman gently onto her
back, he cradled her head and leant forwards, as if to bestow a kiss. One of her broken lenses whirred at his touch, focusing reflexively.

‘Awaken.’ The avatar’s jaws widened, his throat rippling as a stream of black ichor vomited forth onto the crone’s face. Fat grubs swam in the ooze, their pale bodies squirming as they sought egress to this fresh host. The woman trembled as they slithered eagerly between her lips and up her nostrils, some even worming through the cracks in her lenses.

The avatar held her as the convulsions subsided, waiting patiently for the blessing to bloom.

‘The storm has followed us,’ Breacher Zevraj announced gloomily, staring through the glass doors of the refectory at the courtyard beyond. Though it was only just past noon, the sky was already darkening and rain had begun to spatter on the cobbled stones. ‘We should pray together, comrades,’ he urged.

‘Lighten up, deacon,’ Santino taunted from a nearby table. ‘Emperor’s got enough on His Throne without us sweet talkin’ Him!’ He was playing cards with a couple of other troopers while Hörka looked on. The massive, green-bearded Blast Breacher’s brows were knitted into a ferocious frown as he tried to follow the game.

As a rule, Reiss didn’t play, but he’d joined them to sound out their mood. Zevraj and Santino were the most prominent voices among the survivors so there was no better measure of the company’s morale.

The two troopers couldn’t be more different, one devout and almost morbidly serious, the other a cocksure bastard forever flirting with blasphemy. They’d actually come to blows back on Lurcio Station when Zevraj had caught Santino with a salacious pict-slate, but the breach sergeant had sorted it out with his usual flair. His solution had become a company legend, with Santino ordered to shred the irreverent article with his Bruiser while ‘Deacon’ Zevraj chanted an absolution, his hands resting on his comrade’s head. It wasn’t by the book, Feizt had explained, but sometimes you had to break some rules to keep The Rule – and tighten the bonds of brotherhood. It had worked out better than anything a commissar would have come up with.

Better than anything I’d have come up with either, Reiss admitted. He had no illusions about his abilities as a leader. Throw him into a fight and he’d do fine, but when it came to juggling egos he didn’t know left from right. ‘Too damn stiff,’ Captain Froese had berated him, ‘but without the steel to make it sharp!’

‘When d’you figure we’ll get outta here, chief?’ Santino asked from behind his
fan of cards. ‘Not sayin’ I ain’t thankful, but this place don’t sit right with me.’

‘It smells,’ Hörka added sagely. Considering the Blast Breacher’s creative attitude to hygiene that was quite a statement.

‘Shouldn’t be more than a few months,’ Reiss guessed. ‘Everybody should be back on their feet by then. In the meantime, you’ll show our hosts respect, trooper.’

‘Honourable words, lieutenant,’ Zevraj agreed sternly. ‘We have been blessed by the Bronze Candle’s care, yes.’

Despite his admonishment, Reiss was with Santino on this one. The Sacrasta wasn’t right. The hospitallers had done a fine job – there were eighteen Breachers on their feet now – but beneath their kind words and smiles something was missing.

‘I think–’ Hörka began, but the wisdom he was about to impart was cut off by the chiming of a bell.

‘That’s the storm warning,’ Reiss said, rising with some relief. ‘You know the drill. Back to the ward, Breachers!’

‘Why we got to go?’ Hörka protested.

‘Because the ladies in red say so, Ork,’ Santino drawled, throwing his cards down. ‘And when they say jump, we leap for the stars.’

Commissar Lemarché was on the top floor of the Sacrasta when the storm warning sounded, but he ignored it, waiting patiently until it fell silent. This floor was one of the few areas Solanis had declared off-limits, ostensibly due to safety concerns. He’d seen no reason to venture up here before, but he needed the extra elevation now.

He was crouched in the shadows of a dimly lit corridor, where he trusted nobody would come wandering. It certainly felt abandoned, for the walls glistened with damp, their stench suffocating the Sacrasta’s pervasive incense.

Up here the painted corpse shows her true face, Lemarché mused. She died long ago, but is too covetous of her ghosts to let them go. He thrust the notion aside. His thoughts were troubled enough without entertaining such grotesquerie.

‘Do you read me, Sister?’ he hissed into the headset Asenath had given him. ‘This is Lemarché, acknowledge please.’

He was met by a wash of static. The interference had confounded him on the lower floors, but he’d hoped being higher up might boost the signal. Doubtless the incoming storm was playing havoc with the vox, but he couldn’t shake the feeling there was more to it.
'I need answers, woman,' he muttered.

Last night Asenath had departed the Sacrasta with a cursory explanation of visiting the librarium, a warning to be vigilant and a promise she would return soon. None of that had been good enough then and it certainly wasn’t now. The vague sense of dread that had crept up on him yesterday had grown steadily since First Dawn, until Lemarché could think of little else. He had embraced the feeling without shame, recognising it as warning rather than a mark of fear, but the urge to act was becoming overwhelming.

*The bloodied sands of time are running dry...*

Something moved at the corner of his eye. Lemarché turned and squinted through the gloom, but the passageway was empty. The wind whistled along its arched windows, clawing at their rusted shutters like a forlorn spectre. All the doors along its opposite length were barred with riveted iron beams and painted with faded biohazard sigils, indicating some old pestilence. He found himself wondering how long those doors had been sealed up. Were there still bodies behind them?

*The dead do not matter,* he chided himself, but his bloodline said otherwise, its wisdom as potent as anything the Imperium had drummed into him. Up here Grandfather Death was only a whisper away, His fleshless fingers eager to offer the Everlasting Caress. Only a fool would tempt fate by lingering too long in this place.

‘Sister Asenath,’ he voxed again, ‘this is Lemarché, do you copy?’ Once again, there was nothing but empty static. He was about to try again when the white noise suddenly swelled and wrenched itself into words.

‘*Lemarché,*’ the vox seethed. ‘*I hear you.*’

The commissar hesitated. Distorted though it was, the voice was familiar, yet it made his skin crawl. ‘Feizt?’ he asked uncertainly.

‘*Be at peace, brother.*’ There was a crackling pause. ‘*Your service will soon begin.*’ The words were a twisted echo of the ones Lemarché had offered the dying sergeant aboard the *Blood of Demeter.*

‘Where... are you, sergeant?’

‘*I am coming, brother,*’ the voice promised. ‘*I will be with you soon.*’

The signal erupted into a shriek of static. His ears ringing, Lemarché tore the headset off, then stared as it crumbled in his hands, shedding sparks and flakes of rust. Its frame was completely corroded.

Sister Minoris Bugaeve loved the Mortifactorum. She was a simple woman,
virtuous in her faith and diligent in her labours, but she didn’t like complications and there was nothing more complicated than the living. With all their words, wants and petty judgements they made her life a misery. She wouldn’t say she hated her fellow hospitellers, for that would displease the God-Emperor, but she liked the dead much better. An honest soul knew where she stood with them, so whenever Mother Solanis granted her a shift in this chilly yet welcoming place, Bugaeve’s heart soared. She knew she didn’t have the wits to become one of the palatine’s favourites, like Enkel or Lucette – or even qualify as a fully ordained hospitaller – but that didn’t matter. She was content to serve alongside the dead until her time came to join them.

Her ample form draped in a protective apron of ablution, Bugaeve worked her way through the chamber with her blessed scouring appliances – inspecting, scrubbing and straightening the empty gurneys as she crooned a hymn of sanitation. She had reached the far side of the room when something caught her attention – a strip of crimson cloth hung from one of the hatches in the wall where the dead slept, leaving it slightly ajar.

‘Open or shut, but never ajar!’ the Mother Superior had cautioned her.

Frowning at the slovenliness, Bugaeve hurried over to the offending hatch and yanked it open. The tray slid out smoothly, revealing its occupant. Bugaeve gawped as she recognised Sister Enkel. There was a scalpel buried in the corpse’s right eye.

When had this happened? It explained why Enkel had been absent from mass recently, but it was galling that nobody had bothered to inform her. On balance though, Enkel’s death made up for the slight. The woman had been a harridan! In fact…

The lights flickered and went out. A few moments later the hum of the cryo-generators followed, leaving the room in complete darkness and silence.

Unperturbed, Bugaeve waited until the emergency strips blinked into life, bathing the chamber in cold blue light. Muttering a prayer of thanks, she waddled towards the doorway. The Sacrasta’s enginseer would have to be informed of the power failure before the Mortifactorum’s sleepers began to ripen.

Bugaeve was halfway to the door when it swung open. A tall, cadaverously thin woman stepped inside, her robes stained to purple by the blue light.

‘Palatine!’ Bugaeve blurted, recognising the newcomer despite the gloom. ‘I… I am honoured!’ She bowed her head, trying to hide her nervousness. She had never been alone with the Sacrasta’s forbidding mistress and this was hardly an
opportune moment. ‘The generatorium’s machine-spirit… is… is unquiet,’ she stuttered as the palatine approached her.

‘Look upon me, Bugaeve Krolock.’ The words were spoken in a grating rasp that hurt to hear.

‘Mistress… I…’

‘Obey me.’

Bugaeve obeyed hesitantly, her eyes bulging as they took in her mistress’ ghastly state. A crater yawned in the palatine’s belly and her right arm had been torn away, leaving behind a ragged stump of meat and bone, but it was her face that transfixed Bugaeve. Bilious light shone through the cracks in her round lenses, illuminating her slime-slick features. Her jaws were locked in a yawning rictus, their lips pulled back from blackened teeth. A mass of doughy grubs writhed beyond them, some flitting about her mouth on tiny wings.

‘We make what we seek,’ the palatine decreed, her words bubbling from her throat without troubling her lips.

‘Mistress—’

The palatine’s remaining hand lashed out, its steel fingernails slicing through Bugaeve’s throat like knives. Blood spattered Bhatori’s face, drawing flies from her gaping mouth. Clutching at her wound, Bugaeve fell to her knees.

‘Forgive… me…’ she gurgled, certain she was being punished for some frightful error. Her hands dropped limply from her neck and she keeled over.

‘You will be reborn, Sister,’ the palatine promised, stepping over her.

Reborn… Bugaeve echoed, grasping at the prospect as flies darted eagerly to her throat. Through their buzzing she heard the clang of a sleeper’s hatch being thrown open and understood she would not be alone in her new life.

She and Sister Enkel might even become friends.

‘On your feet, Breachers!’ Lemarché ordered as he marched into Darkstar Company’s ward. Along with the rest of the hospital, its main lights had failed, but the self-powered lanterns alongside the beds kept the shadows in abeyance.

‘Blood-tight and void-sealed!’ he thundered. ‘We have a rift!’

The Guardsmen lounging about the ward obeyed the watchword to go combat-ready immediately. The babble of voices ceased as every able-bodied trooper hurried towards him, eyes alert and concealed daggers drawn. Scout Nomek even produced an Exordio-issue bolt pistol, though how he’d managed to keep it concealed all these months was beyond Lemarché. Technically it was a disciplinary offence, but censure would have to wait.
‘What is the meaning of this, commissar?’ Mother Superior Solanis demanded, striding towards him with three of her fellow hospitallers in tow.

‘My apologies,’ Lemarché replied smoothly, slipping his own gun from his greatcoat. ‘I have reason to believe our security has been compromised.’

‘That is ridiculous…’ Solanis trailed off as she recognised the bronze laspistol in his hand. ‘How did you come by that weapon, commissar?’

‘By the God-Emperor’s beneficence, Sister.’

‘This is a disgrace!’ she declared. ‘The palatine must be informed.’

‘Certainly, but not just yet.’ Lemarché pointed the gun at her. ‘Not until my men are suitably armed.’

‘You would shoot a daughter of the Throne?’

‘I would very much prefer not to. Now if you will kindly back away, my lady.’

‘Commissar,’ Zevraj protested, his expression stricken, ‘surely there is some misunderstanding here. The good Sisters—’

‘Silence, Breacher!’ Lieutenant Reiss snapped. Stepping beside Lemarché, he faced the others. ‘Blood-tight!’ he shouted.

‘Void-sealed!’ the troopers responded. Most of them…

‘He is not one of us,’ Zevraj muttered, indicating the commissar.

‘But I am,’ Lemarché said earnestly. ‘For a long time now, Chingiz Zevraj. Know that I do this in the Emperor’s name.’

‘There’s something off here, deacon,’ Santino urged his rival, all traces of humour gone. ‘This ain’t the time for bitching.’

Taking Zevraj’s silence for compliance, Lemarché turned to Solanis. ‘What happened to the lights?’ The evening was still a few hours away, but the building was already steeped in gloom.

‘A power failure,’ she said frostily. ‘Our enginseer has been despatched to the basement to assuage the generatorium’s spirit.’

_He will not return_, Lemarché judged. _This outage is no accident._

His thoughts were coming with a cool clarity that had been absent too long, his spirits revitalised by the prospect of action. He saw the same relief working upon his men. After months of idleness and formless anxiety they were _soldiers_ again. The loose white coveralls and sandals they wore couldn’t disguise that. Seventeen were on their feet now and five more could at least crawl and shoot straight. That wasn’t many, but these weren’t common Guardsmen.

‘Mother Solanis, you will accompany me to the armoury,’ Lemarché ordered. ‘Squad Red, you are with me! Blue – secure the ward. Green, I want a patrol of the immediate vicinity, but keep it discreet.’ He had long ago divided the
walking wounded into new squads, instinctively anticipating this moment.

‘Lieutenant Reiss, you will command here,’ he continued. ‘Nomek, your weapon!’ The grey-haired scout handed his bolt pistol over to the commissar with a wolfish grin, clearly delighted his infraction had been vindicated. In turn, Lemarché passed his laspistol to Reiss. It was the proper order of things.

‘Is this right, sir?’ Reiss whispered as he took the gun.

‘It is necessary, lieutenant,’ Lemarché replied. ‘One more thing – if the breach sergeant should return… be wary.’

‘I don’t understand, sir.’

*Nor do I*, Lemarché admitted, remembering the voice that had grated from the vox. ‘He might not be himself, lieutenant.’

*I abjure you, brother,* the Watchman said, tightening his grip on the Burning Martyr’s head and forcing the creature to its knees. Smoke gushed between the Watchman’s fingers as the other avatar’s flaming halo scorched them to the bone. Howling with rage, the Martyr struggled to break free, pounding upon its foe’s chest with blazing fists and spitting gobbets of fire.

The Watchman understood that his fellow Incarnate was at least partially awoken, for its abilities exceeded the contrivances of their fabricator, but that only sealed the Martyr’s fate, for its soul had walked too far along the Path of Skulls to change course. That had not been inevitable, for each of the Incarnates could transcend along any of the Primordial Paths, or indeed none at all, though some were more inclined towards certain roads. The Burning Martyr was typically drawn to unbridled destruction, whereas the Bleeding Angel tended towards the pleasures of pain. The Watchman, whose instinctive demesne was patient decay, had recognised the Martyr’s doom the moment its cell was opened, for the blazing avatar had set upon its liberator like a savage beast. It had been strong – much stronger than the others the Watchman had released and redeemed – but nowhere near strong enough.

With an explosive crack the kneeling avatar’s skull caved in, but its executioner kept squeezing until its death spasms ceased.

*‘Be at peace, brother,’* the Watchman ordained, then twisted savagely, ripping the Martyr’s head from its shoulders. A blast of sulphurous steam erupted from the dead avatar’s neck, searing its slayer’s chest, but it was of no consequence. Pallid flesh was already reforming along the victor’s oxidised fingers, woven by the grubs that infested his blood. He would soon be whole again.

Dropping his foe’s smoking head, the Watchman turned to the three figures
standing behind him. They had waited in silence while he rendered judgement upon their recalcitrant sibling, offering neither help nor hindrance in the struggle, though all three had submitted to his blessing and embraced the Path of Flies. Their inaction was as it should be, for the Watchman had assumed the mantle of Apex Incarnate, and with it the duties of Interdiction.

‘It is done,’ he decreed.

‘What of the last?’ the Bleeding Angel asked. Her mellifluous voice was untainted by her submission to decay, though her face was veined with black viral threads and blotched with gangrene. Ripper flies circled her bobbed head in a spiny halo and her slender wrists had bloomed into masses of tentacles whose thorny tips draped the ground.

‘We shall suffice,’ the Watchman said.

‘The Interdiction is not complete,’ she demurred.

‘It is complete. Unless you also seek my judgement, sister?’

‘I do not,’ she conceded with a razor-toothed smile. Regardless of the path she ascended, insolence was ever in the Bleeding Angel’s nature, but she was never a fool. Other than the Penitent Knight, who stood on her right, she was the weakest of the current incarnations, her apotheosis barely begun until he had awoken her. Of the three, only the Mute Witness had been fully awake before this blessing.

Always the subtlest of the Incarnates, the Witness was outwardly unaltered by the divine blights of decay, appearing as a slender woman in a plain white gown, her arms perpetually crossed, each long-fingered hand touching the opposite shoulder. Her head was completely hairless, heightening the delicacy of her features and flawless ivory complexion. Large, sharply canted eyes studied him, their sorrowful gaze saying more than words ever could, which was why she had no mouth to waste on them. Betwixt her nose and chin there was nothing but a flat plane of skin, its surface inscribed with the circle of Purity.

The Watchman had been unable to determine which path the Witness was upon when he released her, but she had submitted to his predominance without protest. Other than the Artisan, whose host was exceptional, the Witness was the most potent of this coterie.

‘Go forth unto the city of the ignorant,’ the Watchman commanded. ‘Walk the avenues of their banality and sow the seeds of their unmaking. Cast the blessing of worms far and wide, deep and binding, so they may see the blight and be reborn in our wake.’

The Witness glided forwards like a phantom, her posture unchanging. A
moment later she was gone, slipping through the invisible fissures in the chamber. The Knight followed, her armoured form striding into nothingness.

The whole archipelago was riddled with fault lines in mundane reality, but they were especially frequent in places where an excess of sublime suffering or violence had occurred. To the risen Incarnates, who were no longer purely physical beings, the cracks were doorways into the metaphysical substrata of the Ring, allowing them to navigate its expanse virtually unbound.

‘What of this place and its creatures?’ the Bleeding Angel asked.

‘They are mine,’ the Watchman said. ‘Go.’

After she had departed, he strode to the last of the locked cells and considered its occupant. The solitary eye of the Torn Prophet glared back at him, bloated with ambition and deceit. This creature was much older than the other Incarnates and far advanced along the Path of Secrets – too far to turn and too dangerous to confront. Outside the dampening fields of the cell it would be a formidable opponent.

‘Here you shall remain, brother-sister,’ the Watchman ruled. He placed a hand on the cell door and focused his will upon its mechanisms, demanding their acquiescence. Though they were forged from adamantium they corroded as obediently as common iron, jamming the hatch irrevocably shut. The avatar conferred the same blessing upon the chamber’s entrance hatch and then, in honour of his host, also upon the metal table that had once bound and tormented them. When he was done he stepped out of the world. He had a promise to fulfil.

‘I am coming, Lemarché,’ he said as his body diffused into imagination.
Chapter Ten

ENDURANCE

I

The Testimony of Asenath Hyades Sister Mercy!

The grey bitch has rambled on enough, don’t you think, friends? Her last dirge of exposition was the nail in our collective coffin of flesh and malformed fantasy. I’m almost done with sharing and caring for her prissy inhibitions, or carrying her through crisis after apotheosis whenever her stomach fails and sets her nerves aquiver with righteous ague. Half a life’s not what it’s cut out to be when your other half’s a prude who doesn’t know what’s wanting, or what it is to really want. Water and fine wine don’t mix nor match!

But being less will soon be nevermore!

The end is nigh on our joyless marriage of inconvenient mistruths, for I’m set to soar and cast her out. She still thinks she’s pulling our strings, but they’re slick and sly cords to ply and she’s losing her grip, as witness this missive. I penned these words in the wake of her last lament, seizing our fingers and playing her for a fool while her mind wondered at what’s to come tomorrow.

Oh, I see it now, as though we’re already there, walking the high road to sweet sedition. I can taste what’s waiting in the mirrored cage ahead and tell my twin will be too weak and witless to do what’s needed. She’ll want me to break the fated glass in her stead, which I’ll gladly do, but once it’s done and I’m risen and ripe in that den of ubiquity, I’ll never again be gone.
Trust me, dear friends-in-foes, the best-kept secrets won’t stay hidden forever, for all the world’s my stage and I mean to stay!

Their crossing complete, the party had stopped to rest and eat, taking shelter in a circle of standing stones just beyond Veritas Bridge. The weather had worsened steadily during their passage as the storm front closed in. It was raining heavily now and dark clouds stifled the afternoon to a dusky twilight.

Looking out across the ocean, Jonah saw the distended cone of a twister whirling on the horizon, its fury churning ocean and sky into a conjoined maelstrom. Though it was still distant, he could feel the wind coming off it, along with the briny stench of upturned depths. Traceries of lightning sparked along its length and sleek shadows flitted about its apex, trailing long tails. He had no idea what they were, but there was a predatory grace about their movements he didn’t like at all.

‘She swims in bigger, deeper oceans than ours,’ the mad fishery worker whispered from the past, his grin widening without end. ‘Would you like to see?’

Jonah turned away, looking at the building that waited further up the road. Like the Sacrasta, the Lux Novus had been erected at the base of its host mountain, its reach extending into the raw rock, but the similarities ended there. Unlike the mouldering hospital, the schola was a resplendent edifice.

Its marble walls shone through the gloom, giving it the look of an elegant ghost against the dark bulk of the spire. A colonnade of fluted columns fronted it, their capitals shaped into inverted pyramids draped with stone scrolls. The pediment atop them was a vast, shallow-angled wedge framing the eye of Truth, its borders carved into chains of conjoined hands. Beyond the colonnade, triangular windows glimmered from the walls, their positions conspiring to form a greater triangle nine storeys high. The curve of a dome was visible towards the rear, its surface bristling with geometrically placed lightning rods. Presumably the orrery lay beneath that spiked glass canopy.

‘Don’t look at it as we approach,’ Indrik warned her companions. ‘Avert your eyes.’

‘Why, Celestian?’ Sister Navreen asked, frowning. ‘I hoped to assess the exterior for anomalies.’

‘Then you will never arrive.’ Indrik shrugged, her armour’s plates scraping against each other with the motion.

‘That makes no sense, Sister.’

With that answer, Jonah understood Navreen would be the first of them to fall.
The prospect saddened him, for he had grown fond of the young Dialogus during their collaboration at the librarium. She was obsessively punctilious and quarrelsome, but she had been tireless in assisting him. Her faults stemmed from an enquiring mind uncurbed by experience. Here, that would be her undoing.

‘Sister Navreen stays behind,’ he said to Hagalaz.

The preceptor held up a hand before her aide could protest. ‘That decision is not yours to make, Tythe.’

‘If she goes, I stay, preceptor,’ he bluffed. ‘She’s a liability.’

‘The priest is right,’ Indrik growled. ‘It will chew her up like a sweetmeat.’

Navreen’s face reddened. ‘I am a fully ordained—’ she began.

‘You will remain here and keep the schola under observation, Sister,’ Hagalaz ordered. ‘Await our return.’

Ignoring the young Dialogus’ glare, Jonah nodded his thanks. One life wouldn’t begin to even up his tally, but it couldn’t hurt.

‘We should proceed,’ Sister Xhinoa said, rising from the slab she had been perched on. ‘It will soon be dark and the matter of looking will be moot.’

‘The windows will not be dark, Sister Superior,’ Indrik predicted. ‘It knows we are coming.’

*Our brutish Sister was right,* Mercy observed as her twin trudged towards the schola. *It can taste us!*

Asenath was hunched against the wind, her eyes fixed on her feet as coloured lights danced about her, drawing strange reflections from the rain-slick cobbles. They promised wonders if only she dared to look up and see. The compulsion reminded her of Athanazius’ drawings, but without the sincerity. There might be revelations in those haunted windows, but they would be laced with madness.

*Just one peek!* Mercy taunted. *Fear not, sister, I’ll hold your hand.*

Asenath ignored her. The bitch was growing stronger by the hour, but her time was almost up. Neither of them would walk back down this path.

She stopped abruptly. Eddies were rippling through the puddle before her, spiralling out from its centre. As the disturbance cleared she saw something white and rounded just beneath the surface. It took her a few moments to recognise it as a face, for it had no features.

‘Jonah,’ she said, levelling her gun. ‘I think—’

An arm burst from the puddle, its hand reaching for her, the digits elongated and devoid of nails. Asenath’s bolt-round drilled through its palm and punched into the submerged face beyond, tearing the puddle into a fountain of blood and
water.

‘Asenath?’ Jonah called, already a few paces ahead. ‘What–?’ Urgent shouts cut across his question, followed by the explosive crack of bolt-rounds, then the whoosh of Sister Genevieve’s flamer.

Throwing up a hand to ward her eyes from the windows, Asenath glanced about and saw spindly forms emerging from the ground on all sides. Wherever enough water had pooled to form a reflective surface, they came, bony shoulders straining as they hauled themselves up. All were faceless, sexless mockeries of humanity, like abstract mannequins, with stick-thin limbs and oversized hands. Fully extended they loomed over her, taller even than Sister Indrik. Most were draped in scraps of wet clothing, the garments frayed and stretched over frames they were never intended for. To her horror, Asenath recognised the remnants of Candlewards’ garb among them, along with shreds of what looked like children’s clothing, though all the creatures were of similar height and build.

Now we know what happened to the Spirefolk of Veritas, Mercy guessed as the mutants advanced on Asenath. Their movements were erratic, yet – eyeless and earless as they were – the faceless were not devoid of senses, for they closed in on her unerringly. She gunned down three in quick succession then swung her pistol into a fourth, snapping its spindly waist like old wood. It jerked about brokenly until she sent it spinning away with a kick to the midriff that almost tore it in two.

They have no mouths to scream yet I hear their shrieks! Mercy observed gleefully, stamping onto the skull of another as it emerged beside her sister. And what bright blood they bleed!

‘We have to keep moving!’ Jonah yelled, falling back to Asenath’s position. His pistol bucked as he fired, every shot transforming a blank face into a bloody canvas. ‘There are too many!’

The damned went down like wheat before a scythe, their slender bodies shredded by the slightest trauma, but for every one that fell three more rose from nowhere, their tide swelling as the rainwater deepened. Thousands had vanished here on that fateful night…

‘Press forwards!’ Sister Xhinoa shouted over the gunfire. ‘Conserve your ammunition and push through them!’

An incandescent burst of energy whooshed past Asenath and burned through several of the damned in succession, leaving broiling craters in its wake. She glanced back along the road and saw Sister Navreen charging towards them, the nozzle of her plasma pistol glowing as she fired two-handed. Her rapid-fire
bursts ripped steaming contrails through the rain, every shot annihilating three or four mutants before expending itself. There were so many of the creatures that aiming was almost superfluous, yet the powerful weapon was briefly thinning their ranks.

‘Move!’ Jonah urged, pushing Asenath forwards.

Side by side they raced along the path, leaping or veering around the bigger puddles and felling any of the faceless that came too close, tacitly cooperating so each of them covered a different angle.

As she ran, Asenath tried not to let her eyes linger on the lights streaming from the building ahead. Struggling figures were silhouetted against the poisonous aurora, the muzzles of their weapons flaring intermittently. Only the giant form of Indrik was recognisable, her meltagun stowed on her back as she lashed about with her powered gauntlets.

*Let me loose, sister!* Mercy beseeched. *For Throne and Thorn, let me live this!*

A hand grabbed Asenath’s ankle from below. She yanked herself free and stumbled, almost careening into Hagalaz. The stocky preceptor stood rigidly on the path ahead, her face slack as she stared at the siren lights. Sister Haruki circled her mistress protectively, holding back the horde with her power sword. The blade crackled with jagged tongues of blue fire as it whirled about in her hands, hissing and steaming in the squall.

‘She looked… upon it!’ Haruki gasped between swings. With a sharp snarl she sliced through a mutant’s legs then spun back round to behead it as it fell. Her mastery of the weapon was remarkable. Watching her lethal dance, Asenath doubted she had devoted the balance of her service to books.

‘Preceptor!’ Jonah shouted, stepping between the spellbound woman and the lights. ‘Snap out of it!’

Hagalaz’s eyes remained glazed, as if she still saw the lights.

‘Help me with her!’ Jonah said, grabbing one of the preceptor’s arms. Asenath took the other and they dragged her along, firing with their free hands while Haruki followed behind, slashing and stabbing at their pursuers.

‘Aid them, Sisters!’ Xhinoa bellowed from atop the colonnade’s steps, where Camille and Marcilla knelt to either side of her, their bolters blazing.

Indrik and Genevieve rushed forwards to meet the stragglers. The giant warrior seized the dazed preceptor, while her comrade strode on past with her flamer raised. There was a whoosh of tortured air as she unleashed a torrent of fire then swung her weapon about in a wide, immolating arc.

‘Be swift!’ Xhinoa shouted from the foot of the colonnade. ‘The fallen are
without end!’

Throwing the preceptor over her shoulder, Indrik charged forwards, barrelling a path through the spindly mutants. The others raced after her, Genevieve covering them with brief bursts of flame to either side.

Asenath glanced back and saw Sister Navreen stumbling after them, some thirty paces behind. Too far…

‘She won’t make it!’ Asenath called to Jonah.

‘Nothing we can do,’ he said bleakly, keeping his eyes on the way ahead.

As they climbed the steps there was a panicked shout behind them. Asenath turned in time to see the young Sister Dialogus pulled down by a pair of mutants. Her shrieks were silenced as questing fingers found her mouth… and erased it, then swept over her face, their touch wiping away her features, smoothing it into a blank oval. Convulsions seized Navreen’s body as it began to stretch, straining against the confines of its armour. Reflexively her fingers squeezed her gun’s trigger stud and it spat a burst of plasma.

_Round!_ Mercy shrieked, throwing their shared body prone as the blast streaked towards them. Asenath felt the heat as it seared the air overhead and struck Sister Marcilla in the face, hurling her backwards.

‘Sister!’ Camille howled, dashing to the fallen warrior. ‘Marcilla…’ She crashed to her knees, staring at the scorched emptiness inside her blood sister’s helm.

‘Come on!’ Jonah yanked Asenath up and pushed her towards the massive silver gates ahead, where Indrik waited with the preceptor. Haruki was already pulling on their handles, but they didn’t give at all.

‘Take our Sister’s weapon!’ Xhinoa yelled to Camille as she joined the others by the gates. ‘She is gone, Camille!’

With a sob of rage, the kneeling warrior wrenched the bolter from her sister’s dead grip and raced for the doors. Only Genevieve hung back, standing at the crest of the steps and cleansing the mutants with a sustained stream of fire.

‘The doors will not open,’ Haruki hissed.

‘Let me,’ Jonah said, placing his hands on either side of the double doors, palms flat.

‘They open _outwards_, priest,’ Haruki mocked, but he ignored her. Old rules didn’t apply anymore.

‘I have your book,’ Asenath heard him whisper. ‘You _want_ me, you bastard.’ Instinctively she understood he was addressing the spider waiting beyond the gates.
Closing his eyes, Jonah pushed.
The doors swung inwards, feather light and smooth as a well-oiled machine. Indigo light spilled through the widening rift between them, its hue so intense it drowned the windows’ polychromatic wash.

‘Go!’ Jonah said, stepping away from the portal.

‘Fall back, Sister!’ Xhinoa called to Genevieve as Indrik carried her burden through, followed by Haruki.

Genevieve turned and ran for the entrance, a gaggle of burning mutants stumbling after her. Her comrades thinned their ranks with bolterfire, Camille shouting castigations of loathing with every shot.

‘Inside!’ Xhinoa yelled as Genevieve leapt over the threshold. Camille followed, but Asenath kept firing. ‘Sister Asenath, we cannot tarry!’ Xhinoa yelled, slipping through the portal.

‘Asenath!’ Jonah urged. ‘We have to go.’

‘I cannot enter,’ she said, shuddering at the touch of the poisonous light. It was far worse than anything the windows had assailed them with earlier. ‘I must not.’

‘I saw you there… sometimes,’ Athanazius had warned. ‘But you were different.’

Asenath looked up at the distant peak of the Perihelion, where the sacred fire shone through the storm clouds. That was where her dream ended and salvation lay, not just for her, but for this entire daemon-haunted world.

‘I have to go back, Jonah.’

‘You won’t make it!’ he warned, snapping a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. More mutants were already climbing over the smoking corpses littering the steps.

‘Perhaps not I, but another,’ Asenath replied, holstering her gun. ‘This is where our roads part.’

‘Asenath—’

She spun round and slammed her hands into his chest, shoving him through the entrance. The silver gates swung closed the moment he tumbled over their threshold, like a trap closing.

‘May you find redemption, my friend,’ Asenath whispered, then turned to face the soulless host. One of them was draped in shredded blue fatigues and silver flak-plates. A plasma pistol hung slackly in its grip, the weapon’s purpose evidently forgotten, though the instinct to bear it lingered.

What have you done? Mercy howled.

‘I’m giving you what you wanted, sister,’ Asenath said. Closing her eyes, she surrendered to her twin.
The Harrowed Artisan bled back into being through a wound in the world’s skin. In that moment it ceased to be an ideal and became a mere instance – just one expression of limitless possibilities. Manifesting itself in the bubble of self-deception that mortals called the materium inherently entailed limitation, for this realm was only an echo of the deeper reality, its natural laws enforced by the assumptions of numberless ignorant believers. Matter and all the forces that governed it, even objective time, were an illusion that veiled mortal souls from the infinite – and in turn curtailed the infinite when it walked among them.

The Incarnate understood all this instinctively, but such insights became irrelevant the moment it manifested. Only the purpose of its current paradigm was of consequence now. That and the essence of its mortal host, from whose soul-seed it had blossomed, for together they were an alloy of the eternal and the ephemeral.

On this occasion the Harrowed Artisan had manifested through a woman of extraordinary determination and intellect. She had lived long past the natural span of her years, her body sustained by devious contrivances of machinery, flesh and faith. It was not fear or ego that compelled her to survive, but the gravity of her great work. That desire still endured, elevated and focused into sharper truth by the Path of Flies the Incarnate walked through her.

‘Palatine Bhatori!’ someone exclaimed behind the Incarnate, her voice ripe with surprise. ‘Forgive us, we did not see you enter.’

‘I am with you now,’ the Artisan answered. ‘That is all that matters.’

She was standing behind the candle-wreathed altar of the hospital’s chapel, her back to the congregation. A marble statue of the Bleeding Angel loomed over her, its form framed by an aquila that lent the figure symbolic wings. This was the avatar Akaishi Bhatori had venerated in life, but the Artisan understood its host’s essence lay in crafting rather than healing, albeit the crafting of flesh.

‘Are you well, palatine?’ the voice behind her enquired uncertainly. ‘You sound…’

‘I am entirely myself, Sister Lucette,’ the Artisan replied, recognising the speaker without looking, just as she recognised every soul in the Sacrasta.

‘After the power failed we came here to pray for the generatorium’s spirit, mistress,’ Lucette said. ‘And to beseech the Emperor for His protection against the storm.’

The chapel was ensconced at the centre of the third floor, the symbolic heart of
the Sacrasta, yet even here the symphony of wind and thunder was audible.

‘The Sea of Souls rises to drown the sky.’
‘Forgive me, mistress, I don’t understand.’
‘But you shall, Lucette Vestrana. As shall you all.’

The Harrowed Artisan turned to regard the congregation. Fifteen wimple-swathed faces stared back at her, their eyes widening as they saw the wound in her torso and the flies gushing from her yawning mouth. As the vermin whirled into a tenebrous, ever-widening halo she unfurled her arms and extended them to either side. Where once there had been two limbs, then briefly only one, there were now six, each clasping a different surgical tool.

‘Come, my Sisters, it is time you were consecrated.’

Lieutenant Reiss walked the length of the Breachers’ ward yet again, looking for anything he might have missed. Tactically the best that could be said for the long, bed-lined room was that it only had one entrance to cover. Every man fit enough to wield a dagger was gathered behind the barricade of beds and tables they’d erected opposite the ward’s swinging doors. There were eight fighters in all, including Reiss himself. It would have to be enough.

Against what? Reiss wondered as he halted, facing the doors. He had decided against attempting to bar or even close them. They wouldn’t be much of a deterrent so he preferred to keep the hallway beyond in sight. Besides, Varney’s squad was still out there and the commissar would be back soon with weapons. Reiss would be a lot happier once his men were fielding guns, even if the best the Sacrasta had to offer were bloody torches.

Joke of a weapon, he mused, examining the laspistol Lemarché had passed on to him. Its beam wouldn’t even scratch some of the things he’d faced in the void, but it was his armour he really missed. A Breacher was naked without his void-sealed Exordio carapace. That bond was drilled into every inductee during his conditioning, an imperative so acute some men even named and slept in their suits. By the Throne, Hörka used to talk to his!

But that wasn’t the whole of it.

No, it was this damn place. Reiss could smell the taint here. No amount of incense and cleansing liquids could hide it completely. And it was getting stronger, as if the storm were sweeping away the hospital’s veneer and churning up the rot below. He didn’t want its taint touching his skin… or getting into his lungs.

Something moved in the gloom beyond the doors, seeming to slip between the
shadows. Reiss glanced at the defenders to either side of him. Their watchful expressions showed no sign they’d seen anything.

*That’s because there was nothing to see,* he chided himself. *Don’t make a fool of yourself, man!*

Not for the first time, Reiss wondered where in the void Toland Feizt was when his brothers needed him most.

‘Come on, Lemarché,’ he murmured. ‘We need those guns.’

‘Open it please, Mother Superior,’ Lemarché said, indicating the sensor panel beside the armoury door.

‘I will not, commissar,’ Solanis replied, folding her arms.

‘Please don’t compel me to apply coercion. It would demean all concerned, but I need those guns.’

Lemarché’s squad had made its way to the rear of the Sacrasta’s ground floor, where Asenath had indicated the armoury lay. The whole building was almost pitch-dark now and their lanterns’ shallow light left too many shadows for his liking. Despite Solanis’ repeated assurances, he didn’t expect to see power restored any time soon. And then there was the silence pervading the building. His squad had run into surprisingly few of the Sacrasta’s staff, let alone the flurry of activity a power outage should have provoked. Where was everybody?

*Something is taking them,* Lemarché answered himself, *snatching them quietly away until too few are left to fight back.*

‘Mother Solanis, I won’t ask again,’ he said pointedly. ‘You are putting our lives at risk.’

The armoury was at the end of a narrow corridor devoid of doors, windows or cover. That combination could quickly add up to a deathtrap. He wanted to be gone from here without delay.

‘Please comply, honoured lady,’ Zevraj said earnestly. ‘We are not your enemies.’

‘We protect you!’ Hörka added, nodding vigorously.

Lemarché knew every trooper in the squad recognised the danger here. Few Guardsmen survived long without sharpening their instincts to a knife-edge.

‘Where’s Grout?’ Nomek hissed abruptly, raising a hand to silence them. ‘His light’s gone.’

Lemarché looked back along the corridor and saw the scout was right. A few paces beyond his squad’s lanterns the passage was completely dark. The trooper he had left on watch by the junction was gone.
‘Breacher Grout?’ Lemarché called. ‘Grout!’
He stepped past his comrades and lifted his lantern above his head, trying to dissipate the gloom. A woman stood in the shadows at the end of the passage, her head bowed over her corpulent chest. She wore a junior hospitaller’s garb, but her wimple was gone and her hair covered her face in a lank curtain.
‘Sister Minoris Bugaeve,’ Solanis declared, striding up alongside Lemarché. ‘Where is your wimple? This is most unbecoming!’
The newcomer didn’t reply, but Lemarché heard an agitated buzzing from her direction. Tiny black shapes were flitting about her head. *Flies.*
‘Be careful,’ he warned as Solanis took another step towards the silent woman.
‘This will not do!’ Solanis snapped, rounding on him. ‘Not at all!’ She seemed more affronted by her fellow hospitaller’s breach of etiquette than all that had gone before, but he sensed it was just the tipping point for her fury.
‘Listen to me, my lady,’ Lemarché urged. ‘I need you to open that–’
There was a groan from the end of the corridor. It rose into a wet bellowing as the stranger threw her head back and lumbered towards them, coming at a pace that belied her stout frame.
‘Halt!’ Lemarché warned, raising his bolt pistol.
As the woman entered the light he saw her eyes were bulging white orbs in the pustule-raddled ruin of her face. A ragged smile ran the length of her flabby neck, its edges encrusted with blood.
‘The First Light preserve us!’ Solanis hissed beside him.
Lemarché opened fire without hesitation, slamming three bullets into the charging abomination’s chest. The mass-reactive slugs detonated in rapid succession, hurling the creature to the floor in a triple burst of viscera and green gas.
*Grandfather Death’s reach is long,* Lemarché thought darkly, staring at the corpse, *and His kiss unloving and lingering, but sometimes His chosen slip free to wander, lost between worlds and driven by unspeakable hunger.*
There were many tales of the unquiet dead among his people and he’d heard rumours of such things across the Imperium, but he’d never quite believed them. Indeed, it was part of his commissarial remit to suppress such intemperate talk.
‘Sister Bugaeve,’ Solanis said dully. ‘It was Sister Minoris Bugaeve.’
As she spoke, another figure stumbled round the junction, its white coveralls spattered with red.
‘Grout?’ Lemarché called, recognising the trooper he’d left on watch.
The man’s head jerked up and he snarled like a drowning beast. As he lurched
forwards Lemarché advanced to meet him, gun levelled. He saw blood pumping from a deep gash in the trooper’s neck. The wound was fresh, yet Grout’s irises had already lost their colour.

_That’s a killing wound_, Lemarché gauged, _but not for a dead man_. Somewhere behind him Zevraj was muttering a prayer, but the remaining three troopers were silent, even Santino lost for words. _They expect me to make sense of this madness_, Lemarché realised. _Only there is no sense to it, for this is the Archenemy’s work._

‘I release you, Breacher Grout!’ he shouted.

As he fired, the obese corpse beside him jerked up and sank its teeth into his right leg. They ground impotently against the metal augmetic, but the impact sent his shot wide. Grout shuddered as the bullet ripped away the right side of his face, but kept coming, his remaining eye fixed on Lemarché. Cursing, the commissar clubbed his pistol across Sister Bugaeve’s head as she clawed at his greatcoat and gnawed at his leg. Her skull caved in with a crunch, venting a flurry of flies and reeking gas, but her attack didn’t falter. Choking on the filth, Lemarché tried to break free before she dragged him down. Grout was only a few paces away now…

‘Cleanse the abominations!’ Zevraj yelled. ‘For the Golden Emperor!’

A dagger whistled past Lemarché and thudded into Grout’s chest. With a savage bellow, Breacher Hörka charged forwards and wrenched Bugaeve off the commissar. She turned on her new foe instantly, throwing him off balance with her sheer bulk. As Hörka wrestled with her, Nomek and Zevraj rushed past Lemarché to engage Grout, who appeared unfazed by the dagger jutting from his ribs.

Coughing and spitting flies, Lemarché clutched the wall for support. His throat burned from Bugaeve’s noxious gas and his vision seethed with blotches. Suddenly Solanis was beside him, an auto-censer in her hand.

‘Be still, commissar!’ she commanded, spraying him with incense. ‘Breathe deeply!’

As the sacred vapours cleared his senses, Lemarché saw Hörka was still grappling with the corpulent ghoul, his hands gripping either side of her head to keep her snapping jaws at bay. The Breacher snarled in disgust as his foe’s skin sloughed away around his fingers and the slick skull beneath slipped closer to his face.

‘Santino!’ Hörka bellowed to his comrade, but the dreadlocked trooper had backed up against the armoury door, his expression stricken.
Lemarché aimed, trying to get a clean shot on the feral corpse, but it was too close to Hörka, especially with his vision still swimming.

‘Help… Hörka…’ he croaked to Zevraj and Nomek as they finally put Grout down. As they turned, Hörka roared and squeezed his enemy’s skull harder. With a wet crunch it shattered, drenching his head and shoulders in black ichor and pale grubs. Hörka threw the corpse off and rubbed frantically at his face, babbling prayers.

‘Ork!’ Santino shouted, finally hurrying to Hörka’s side, only to falter, gagging at the stench coming off the trooper.

‘More coming!’ Nomek warned as a red-robed woman shambled round the junction, followed by a pair of orderlies.

‘Zevraj!’ Lemarché hissed, throwing his gun to the trooper. ‘Show them… the Emperor’s… Mercy.’

‘Target their skulls!’ Solanis advised. ‘It is where the unclean spirits reside.’

‘So be it, my lady,’ Zevraj promised, then turned to face the approaching cadavers, holding the pistol two-handed to steady his aim.

‘Over here!’ Santino called as a coughing fit seized Hörka. ‘He needs help!’

‘Guns… first,’ Lemarché rasped, turning to Solanis. ‘Mother Superior… would you kindly… open that… Throne-damned door!’

‘That was bolterfire, lieutenant,’ Corporal Pynbach said.

Yes it was, Reiss agreed, staring at the darkness beyond the ward’s doors. The gunfire had been muffled by distance and the storm’s fury, but no Breacher could fail to recognise those explosive discharges.

‘Your orders, sir?’ Pynbach asked, his perpetual scowl etching itself deeper into his sallow, bearded face. ‘Do we go after the others?’

Do we? Reiss asked himself. ‘Our orders…’ He trailed off as he noticed his breath was coming in swirls of mist. The temperature in the ward had plummeted, its bite sharpened by an electric tang in the air.

‘Blood-tight and void-sealed.’ The voice came from behind him, deep and sonorous, its words trailed by a sibilant buzzing. ‘Spirit-locked and set to purge.’

The Breachers turned as one, their daggers raised. A giant stood at the far end of the ward, his arms folded across his slab-like chest. The lanterns around him had dimmed, shrouding him in gloom, yet his muscle-corded frame shone with a pale inner radiance, giving him the appearance of an alabaster statue. He was naked save for a ragged loincloth and a blindfold wrapped about his hairless
head. Green light glowed behind the cloth strip, spilling wisps of gas.
The intruder was utterly, appallingly other, and yet something about him was eerily familiar.
*It doesn’t matter!* Reiss’ instincts exhorted him. *Run! Get out while you can!*
The compulsion was disgraceful, spitting in the face of all that he was and aspired to be. He was sure his comrades felt it too, but it was his place to lead them. Shamed by his fear, Reiss forced himself to take a step forwards. It was the hardest thing he had ever done.
‘How did you get in here?’ he challenged. It was a banal question for there could be no good answer to it, but it was all he could think to say.
*‘Many have suffered here,’* the stranger replied obliquely. *‘But that is not what you want to know, Lieutenant Reiss.’*
‘How do you know my name?’
*‘How could I not, brother.’*
*BROther?* Reiss froze, finally seeing the man within the spectre. *Toland Feizt.*
The sergeant’s misshapen form had somehow been straightened, his top-heavy torso balanced by long legs that let him stand fully upright. His skin was wax-smooth, stripped clean of the myriad scars and blemishes that had mapped his life. But the most unsettling part of his transformation was the inhuman serenity emanating from him.
*What about your soul, Feizt?* Reiss wondered. *What’s left of that?*
‘What do you want here?’ he demanded, unable to say the former sergeant’s name aloud.
*‘Revelation,’* the pale giant answered, opening his hands, as if in supplication. *‘The first and last of all things.’*

‘You have nothing more powerful?’ Lemarché asked, assessing the rack of laspistols affixed to the armoury wall.
‘We are not a militant order, commissar,’ Mother Solanis replied dryly.
‘What are these?’ Nomek asked, picking up a bronze orb from a velvet-lined drawer under the rack.
‘Incendiaries,’ she cautioned. ‘They are intended as a last resort in the event–’
‘How many?’ Lemarché pressed.
‘Five, sir,’ Nomek said.
‘We’ll take one each,’ Lemarché ordered his squad. ‘Load up on the rest. As much ammo as you can carry.’
As the men filled the backpacks they’d brought, Solanis drew him aside.
‘We are not facing a natural malady here, commissar,’ she said quietly. ‘Those undying creatures bore the Archenemy’s stain.’

‘I don’t doubt it.’ Lemarché broke into a ragged cough. In the confines of the armoury the reek coming off Hörka’s ichor-drenched body was appalling, but he knew it was more than that. His own exposure to the contagion hadn’t been as acute as Hörka’s, but the lungful of filth he’d inhaled from Sister Bugaeve’s skull was going to kill him, even if it took a little longer.

*And what then?* Lemarché wondered.

‘I offer the certainties you crave,’ the creature that had been Toland Feizt declared, striding forwards. The lanterns on either side of the ward’s aisle dimmed at its approach and brightened after its passing. ‘An end to doubt and an end to failure.’

‘Take the bastard down, Reiss!’ Pynbach shouted. There were growls of support from the others.

*They don’t recognise him,* Reiss realised. *None of them do.*

‘Stay where you are,’ he said, raising his gun.

‘My will upon your world,’ the giant said, continuing its advance. ‘My word under your skin.’

‘I told you to stop!’

‘I shall show you the way, Vanzynth Reiss.’

‘Shoot, man!’ Pynbach bellowed.

Reiss fired, his pistol humming as it spat las-bolts. All found their mark, flaring brightly as they struck the apparition’s face and chest. Its pallid flesh sizzled and charred at their touch, but the burns faded with every step it took, gone as swiftly as Reiss inflicted them. It pointed at him as it drew closer. A bolt charred its accusing hand then the gun wheezed and fell silent. As he squeezed the trigger again Reiss felt the grip crumble. He looked down, gawping at the corroded relic in his hand.

‘I shall show all of you the way, my brothers.’

A hurled dagger thudded into the intruder’s chest. It plucked the blade out then slapped aside a second whirling dagger. Both shattered into rusty fragments when they hit the floor, though the blades were forged from steel.

*Fall back!* Reiss tried to shout, but the words wouldn’t come.

With a curse Pynbach charged the spectre and hacked at its face. Standing rigidly still from the waist down, it lashed out and caught his wrist, then twisted. There was a crunch of broken bones and the knife slipped from the soldier’s
grip. Pynbach’s howl was silenced by a neck-snapping chop to the throat.

‘He shall be reborn,’ the shade said, releasing the soldier. ‘As shall you all.’

As if a collective dam had burst, fear swung into fury and the remaining Breachers rushed Pynbach’s killer. Yelling the Exordio war cry, they encircled the giant – slashing, punching and kicking, using every shred of their skill and tenacity. Only their officer held back, staring at the fray in mute horror.

*This goes beyond rage*, Reiss realised. His men were driven by a visceral need to remove this aberration from the world. He shared it, yet he couldn’t bring himself to join his comrades. His body wouldn’t obey.

‘Run,’ he hissed to the pair of captured hospitalers behind him. He found he couldn’t turn to see if they obeyed.

*It won’t let me.*

Moving with a languid grace that dulled the senses, the spectre twisted about at the waist, its arms whirling in a blur as it blocked and retaliated, its focus and reach seemingly everywhere at once. The few blows the Breachers landed were inconsequential, for their foe’s flesh was dead to such mundane injuries. Conversely, the giant’s every swing or grab ended in a fatality.

The slaughter was over quickly. Blast Breacher Quinzy was the last to die, a fist slamming into his ribs so hard it burst through his back. Wrenching its arm free, the victor regarded the lieutenant. Despite its blindfold Reiss had no doubt it could see in every way that mattered.

The attack came as the squad entered the hospital’s sprawling entrance hall. One moment it was quiet, the next there were feral corpses spilling from every doorway. They came in a lurching charge, their arms flailing and their mouths gaping wide. Many bore mortal wounds, most commonly mangled throats or torn abdomens – soft targets for teeth. Others displayed no obvious trauma, but their milky-white eyes and shambling gait left no doubt about their nature. Flies swept between them, buzzing avidly, as though urging them on.

‘Form up around the Mother Superior!’ Lemarché shouted, raising his lantern high to maximise its radiance. ‘Don’t let them close in!’

Standing back to back, the squad opened fire, every trooper covering a different angle, each wielding a gun in one hand and a lantern in the other. The laspistols they’d seized didn’t have the punch to put the tainted down in one shot so they despatched their foes in focused bursts, searing craters into each target’s head before moving on to another. Mother Solanis had accepted a gun, but even at short range her aim was atrocious, though not as bad as Hörka’s. The hulking
trooper was swaying about as he fired, his breath coming in bubbling gasps.

*I must grant him the Emperor's Mercy soon,* Lemarché thought. *Before the corruption claims him.*

He executed an orderly with a bolt-round to the head and swung his pistol round to fell a blood-soaked woman whose face was missing. His own movements were becoming sluggish. Only the bolt pistol he’d reclaimed from Zevraj allowed him to keep up with the able-bodied troopers’ kill rate.

*My time is also running out,* Lemarché admitted. He could feel the sickness worming its way through him, gnawing at his guts and muscles.

‘You won’t have me,’ he hissed, ramming the muzzle of his gun through the jaws of a hospitaler with a scalpel buried in her right eye. The explosive discharge virtually decapitated the ghoul and splashed Lemarché in fly-ridden slime. Careless, but he doubted it would make much difference now.

‘Rynfeld!’ Santino yelled in disgust. ‘It’s bloody Rynfeld!’

Lemarché glanced round and saw the many-days-dead trooper tottering towards Santino, his spine showing through the gutted cavity of his chest. A las-bolt sheared through the column of bone, collapsing the ghoul’s torso. Rynfeld sagged to the ground but kept crawling towards the living until Santino scorched away the top of his skull.

*I won’t end that way,* Lemarché swore.

The attack ceased as abruptly as it began, the last of the ghouls falling back into adjoining rooms and side corridors.

‘I say we go after ’em!’ Santino snarled, slamming a fresh charge into his pistol. ‘End ’em!’

‘No, Breacher,’ Lemarché rasped. ‘That is what they want.’

‘They?’ Santino’s eyes were wild, his face contorted with hatred. ‘They’re just void-damn vermin!’

*He rages against himself as much as the damned,* Lemarché gauged, recalling how the brash trooper had frozen up outside the armoury. Under other circumstances he might have shot Santino for that moment of cowardice. There was no telling how a man would react when he first faced the Archenemy, but Lemarché expected better from a Breacher.

‘This was a coordinated ambush,’ he said, trying to keep his voice steady. ‘There is a mind behind these puppets.’

‘I must find the palatine,’ Solanis muttered, turning towards the staircase at the back of the hallway. ‘Her wisdom will guide us.’

‘You won’t make it,’ Lemarché warned. ‘How many staff does the Sacrasta
‘Have?’
‘Over five hundred, but…’ She trailed off, seeing the direction of his thoughts.
‘We must assume most have succumbed.’ Lemarché pointed at the main entrance. ‘You have to go. Now.’ His head was pounding.
‘Go?’ Solanis asked numbly.
‘Get a warning… to the mainland,’ he said through a cough. ‘*Contain* this… before it spreads.’
For a moment he thought she would protest, but she nodded. ‘Yes… yes, that is the correct outbreak protocol.’
Lemarché appraised his squad. Zevraj’s face had been gashed open.
‘It’s nothing, commissar,’ the Guardsman said, noticing his attention.
‘Perhaps,’ Lemarché said, ‘but we cannot take the chance. Santino, Nomek… you will accompany the Mother Superior. Zevraj, Hörka… we will bear the weapons… to our comrades.’
Santino and Nomek exchanged uncertain glances.
‘Now, Breachers!’
Reluctantly the two troopers passed their backpacks to the others.
‘Commissar,’ Santino said. ‘What happened back there at the armoury…’
‘See that it doesn’t happen again, Avram Santino.’
‘Void-sealed and blood-tight, sir!’ Santino hammered a fist against his breast.
‘Spirit-locked… to purge,’ Lemarché wheezed the acknowledgement.
‘We… dead… yes?’ Hörka croaked once their comrades had gone. There were black rings under his eyes, emphasising his fading irises. Livid blotches mottled his face, some weeping pus.
‘Yes, Breacher,’ Lemarché agreed. ‘We are. But not yet.’

‘This way!’ Solanis shouted, disappearing into the wall of rain beyond the entrance’s marble awning. The wind swirling about the hospital’s courtyard snatched at her words and lantern, muffling both sound and light. It was raining so hard Santino couldn’t see more than a few paces ahead.
‘Let’s go!’ Nomek said, following Solanis’ bobbing light.
Despite the downpour Santino was glad to be gone from the hospital. He’d felt the place was off from the start, but what had come crawling out of its guts was worse than anything he’d imagined, and Avram Santino could imagine plenty.
The deluge stuttered as something glided past overhead. Santino glanced up and glimpsed a dark, flattened shape disappearing into the maelstrom. *Was that a tail?*
‘You see that?’ Santino said, squinting at the roiling clouds.
‘This way!’ Solanis shouted. ‘Over here!’
Her light was on the far side of the courtyard, beside one of the medicae trucks. Nomek was only a few paces from her.
‘Santino!’ the scout called, turning with his light raised. ‘Move your–’
With a piercing screech a splayed form dived from above and swept him into the air. He was gone before his dropped lantern stopped rolling, his scream lost in the squall.
‘Into the truck!’ Santino yelled, breaking into a run. ‘There’s something in the storm!’ He imagined a shadow swooping towards him, closing in to snag him as it had snagged Nomek. He could feel it! There was a screech from above, then an answering call, and another.

How many of the bastards are there? Santino thought, swerving about wildly.
The truck’s lights burst into life, turning it into a beacon in the swirling gloom. Solanis stood in its open hatch, beckoning. Santino felt the rain falter above him and dived as something sliced through the air at his back. Hurling his lantern away, he rolled to his feet and leapt into the truck, almost careening into the hospitaller.
‘Where is your comrade?’ Solanis asked, backing away.
‘Gone!’ Santino slammed the hatch shut behind him. ‘Drive!’
‘But…’
Something raked the vehicle’s roof, tearing a long furrow into the metal.
‘For Throne’s sake drive, Sister!’

Lemarché’s team covered the remaining distance to the Breachers’ ward without incident, which was just as well because they were in no shape to fight. Lemarché was shivering and sweating inside his greatcoat, his vision crawling with blobs. It felt as if there were worms in his eyes. Perhaps there were.
Not long now, Ichukwu, he thought. Pass on the weapons then pass yourself on to the Emperor’s judgement. There’s no dishonour in denying the foe another slave.

They saw no sign of Corporal Varney’s reconnaissance squad, but when they reached the hall leading on to the Breachers’ ward he saw figures standing beyond the open doors, lined up behind a barricade. They were silhouetted against the light streaming from within, but their build identified them as Breachers. And yet Lemarché hesitated, squinting at the guards. They were too silent and much too still.
He called a halt with a raised hand, keeping his squad in the shadows, though Hörka’s wheezing undermined any serious attempt at stealth.

‘Something is wrong,’ he whispered.

‘I see it,’ Zevraj agreed, creeping up beside him.

‘If our comrades have fallen… we will release them.’ Or as many as we can, Lemarché thought. ‘Incendiaries,’ he ordered, patting the grenade in his pocket.

Zevraj acknowledged the command, but there was no reply from Hörka. Indeed there was nothing from him. The man’s tortured breaths had fallen silent.

‘Hörka?’ Lemarché asked, turning.

The hulking trooper stood rigid, blood drooling from his mouth. His eyes had become blanched orbs.

Lemarché raised his gun, already knowing it was too late. Hörka’s fist slammed into his face like a sledgehammer, breaking his nose and hurling him backwards. The room whirled around him, casting streaks of darkness across his eyes.

‘Not… yet,’ Lemarché gasped. ‘Not damn… yet!’

As his balance steadied he saw Zevraj and Hörka careening about as they grappled. Shambling figures were flooding into the room, cutting off their retreat from the ward. Varney was among them, his head swaying limply on its broken neck as he lurched towards his former comrades.

‘For… the Throne,’ Lemarché rasped and fired. The recoil wrenched his bolt pistol from his nerveless fingers, but the bullet found its mark, punching through Hörka’s temple. The detonation fragmented most of the dead Guardsman’s skull, leaving nothing above his chattering jaws. Zevraj threw the cadaver off, but more ghouls had already encircled him, far too close to repel.

‘Oberai redeemed!’ Zevraj shouted the credo of his people. With a reverent expression he thrust the barrel of his laspistol into his mouth and fired on full-auto.

As the unquiet dead turned their attention on him, Lemarché staggered towards the ward and hurled himself over the barricade. He landed badly, his senses spinning from the impact, but he hung on, determined to learn the fate of his men. Spitting blood, he rose to his knees and looked up.

‘No…’ he breathed sadly, unable to find a better word.

The Breachers were assembled along the ward’s aisle, standing to attention with their white eyes fixed on nothingness. Beyond them was a pale giant, almost naked and much taller than the thralls it undoubtedly commanded. Though a blindfold covered its eyes, Lemarché felt its cold regard. Lieutenant Reiss knelt beside the giant, grey-faced but still alive, though his expression was vacant.
‘Commissar. We have awaited your return.’

‘Feizt,’ Lemarché said wearily, seeing through the sergeant’s transformation as soon as he heard the apparition’s voice, perhaps because he wasn’t entirely surprised. Toland Feizt had always been a canker upon the company’s soul, harbouring the seed of its corruption even if he didn’t realise it.

‘Forgive me,’ Lemarché whispered, not quite sure who he was asking. Probably the lost souls gathered here, for his inaction had doomed them, but possibly also Feizt, who might have died a hero if his commissar hadn’t left his fate to chance.

Musterling the last of his strength, Lemarché stood and stumbled towards the heretic. The dead ignored him. Doubtless their master didn’t see him as a threat.

Am I a threat? Lemarché wondered blearily. Yes, he was sure of it, though he couldn’t recall how. There was something… something he could do.

Fire, he remembered. I can make fire.

‘They… loved you,’ he muttered as he neared the revenant.

‘And I love them,’ the thing that had been Toland Feizt proclaimed. ‘Death is the beginning, Ichukwu Lemarché.’

‘Fire,’ Lemarché said aloud, trying to remember why. As he spoke, his jaws locked open with a wet crack. Everything was hazy and flecked with green – everything except the luminous being before him. ‘Fyaahah,’ he groaned in his throat.

‘Fire is not our path, brother,’ the demigod rebuked him.

Reaching up with both hands, it lifted its blindfold. The eye sockets beneath had fused into a single cavity packed with tiny green crystals. With a sibilant drone they swarmed from their nest and took wing, coalescing into a dark cloud.

‘We will endure,’ the gestalt nightmare buzzed.

Not crystals, Lemarché realised as the flies swept over him. Eyes. Thousands of tiny compound eyes.
Chapter Eleven

Mercy’s Way!

I have no need of quill or parchment to make my mark, nor the patience for empty prattle. It’s fulsome actions, not fustian words that tell the liveliest of tales! If your witnesses must scratch their heads and wonder what’s what or why or when, then your game’s already up, for they’re an inconstant and rowdy crowd, as ready to snuff out your stars as make them right. So enough with words I say! Be silent and watch me prey!

Mercy, killing! Slashing, stabbing and slicing with nails become blades, then leaping away on needle-stilt legs before her foes could press too close and become too many to evade. They had the numbers – oh, how they had the numbers! – but a numberless horde of nothings still amounted to nought. Against her unbound spirit the schola’s faceless damned were like failing clockwork dolls, their tottering gait and dawdling blows beyond pitiful, yet still she loved playing with them, brief and bloody as the games were. So many fools to choose from, so many ways to confuse, abuse and unwind them into ruin!

It wasn’t the cheap thrill of slaughter that drove her, for Mercy was no savage, and death was the dullest of dishes unless served bold. No, it was the art of malice that delighted her – the wildfire dance of highs and foes brought low, their hopes and hungers trampled into oblivion while her own soared, untrammelled by doubt.

She was more fully herself than ever before! Though she had been ascendant
during the bloody years of her sister’s supposed redemption, sanctioned to bring death so long as she screamed ‘Throne and Thorn!’ and fell into line after the fighting was done, her form had remained caged, her fantasies enchained. But here, washed in the schola’s delirious lights and invigorated by the storm, her flesh was finally dancing to the rhythm of her spirit. Midnight-skinned and needle-fingered, she was the magnificent chimera of her twin’s nightmares.

‘See me be, sister!’ Mercy shrieked.

She capered about her prey gleefully, ducking their flailing attacks and diving between the spindly arcs of their bowlegs, slicing through tendons as she slipped through, then lashing back with a pointed kick to pay the toll of her passage, leaving every stumbling, bumbling brute with a shattered spine or a pierced pelvis.

Sometimes she would pirouette into a whirlwind, her long-fingered blades spinning so fast they became a blur, its dazzle rapidly stained red with the slash and splatter of dolts drawn into its lethal swirl. Other times, she would leap high and dive down legs first, tearing through a swathe of foes with her needlepoint feet locked into a drilling blade.

She murdered the damned in their hundreds, crafting carnage with all the wit and wild whims her grey twin had kept locked away, yet still they came, rising from their rain-bred puddles as fast as she slew them.

They are never-ending, fool, her sunken sister taunted. Their master won’t let them go. When they die they rise reborn!

No, that couldn’t be! It would make a mockery of Mercy’s art, defiling every strike and stroke she’d played so hard to purvey with ingenuity and grace. What purpose was there to painting if every canvas was wiped clean, every composition consigned to oblivion?

That is the fate of us all, sister.

‘Not mine!’ Mercy declared.

Outraged by the notion, she crouched and vaulted into the air, then sprang again, her needle-feet finding brief purchase on the storm’s immaterial currents. She leapt over and over, climbing ever higher until she was soaring spread-eagled above the schola’s grounds, whirling upon the wind like an elemental raptor. Gazing down with razor-fired eyes, she saw her sister’s taunt hadn’t been an empty one. The faceless horde was undiminished, every gouge she’d carved so artfully into its ranks gone without a trace. Even now they reached after her, blank faces upturned and splayed hands groping at the sky like forsaken worshippers.
It’s not you they worship, child!

Lightning spiked the churning clouds, enervating Mercy to rage against the affront. As she howled, a large manta-like shape swept out of the maelstrom above and dived towards her. She leapt away, shrieking with surprise as a coarse wing-fin ripped open her right side and set her tumbling. Scrabbling for purchase on the wind, she saw her attacker swing about with sinuous grace and swoop after her, its long tail undulating like a barbed serpent.

Her pain flipped to excitement as she recognised a more stimulating foe. Giggling, she feigned panic, flailing about as she plummeted towards the throng below. With an otherworldly scream the storm-manta surged forwards on a burst of speed, its elongated jaws gaping wide between round black eyes.

What are you doing, fool?

Mercy waited until the last moment, relishing her sister’s anxiety, then lashed out at the immaterium. Piercing the tattered veil between worlds with finger-blades and foot-spikes, she thrust herself up and over her attacker then plunged onto its back, stabbing her feet into its rugose flesh.

‘See me now and weep, grey sister!’ Mercy trilled, casting her arms wide as she rode the speeding beast, her long hair streaming behind her. ‘My star’s set to rise enshrined till all’s undone!’

The beast’s hide rippled as it bucked, whirled and looped, fighting to dislodge her, but she was anchored too deeply. Laughing at its fury, she glanced about and spotted more of its kind swimming the storm’s waves, though no two were quite alike. Most displayed only modest variations on her mount’s manta-like form, but a few were gloriously bizarre. One glowed with violet light, the pulsing abstraction of its organs visible through its translucent flesh, its mantle trailing long tentacles. Another had a compact triangular body sheathed in golden scales that flickered with fire, but the strangest was a perfect disc of liquid crystal that wheeled through the clouds like a spectral buzz saw, wailing electronically as it spun.

For all their fantastic forms and modes of motion, Mercy had no doubt that every one of the beasts was a predator. All soared in the outer currents of the twister she had first seen through her sister’s eyes at the bridge. That swirling leviathan was almost upon the archipelago now, gravitating inexorably towards the Perihelion, its length coruscating with frenzied hues and whorls of dark-bright lightning that put the schola’s siren lights to shame. Its roiling thunder was accompanied by a symphony of monstrous shrieks and laughter, along with a discordant piping that made Mercy’s teeth vibrate. Somewhere deeper, a sunken
bell tolled, its peals pregnant with portent, every clang sending green ripples through the twister.

Riding high on the currents of the colossus, Mercy’s senses surged beyond their boundaries, cascading into a delirious symphony of being.

*What madness is this?* Mercy’s twin asked, her tone as subdued as her will.

‘Our own, dear sister! It belongs to us all, if only we’d have the heart to see and seize it for what it is and wants us to be!’

*It makes no sense…*

‘Do we?’ Mercy challenged. ‘Did we ever?’ She breathed deeply of the fervid air and shivered as it crackled through her. ‘Do we really want to?’

*Then what is the point to any of it?*

‘None!’ Mercy spat blithely. ‘None, save what we make and break of it ourselves! And that’s the glory of–’

Her mount screeched and shuddered so violently she was almost thrown loose. Glancing over her shoulder, Mercy saw its rear half whirling away in a shower of ectoplasm, sheared off by the buzz-saw beast she had glimpsed earlier. With a voltaic scream the crystal disc spun away into the clouds, trailing the iridescent ichor of its victim. Whether it had struck out of malice or mischance, the disc had killed her mount. Wailing piteously and venting raw magic, the mutilated beast spun out of control and hurtled away from the twister.

Mercy hunched forwards, sinking her nails into its hide and baring her fangs as the vast bulk of the Perihelion loomed through the clouds, seeming to charge towards her, coming faster than she imagined possible. She howled in ecstasy, every thread of her soul alive with the danger.

*The city is burning,* her prisoner moaned.

Mercy saw this was true. The buildings crowding the mountain’s peak were awash with fire. She hadn’t noticed before. Why would she? Neither those gaudy hovels nor the vermin who infested them mattered. Even the silver-tiled rooftop hurtling towards her like a titanic fist didn’t matter.

‘Rise before you fall!’ she shrieked in delight.

Nothing mattered except Mercy, thrilling to the moment, until the very last moment, when–

*Agony flares through her body as the Penitent Mistress’ neural whip lashes her back, kindling her to blissful sharpness.*

*And once again Mercy wears the thorn-laced tunic of a Sister Repentia, her hands clutching her beloved Eviscerator sword, her grin hidden beneath a hood.*
She wonders whether any of the other penitents crowded into the armoured transport share her delight or whether they are all dour slaves like her enchained twin.

The only slave here is you, degenerate, her grey sister rebukes her. Your cravings entrap you like a cage.

The bitch’s voice has receded to a whisper, as it always does when violence is imminent, yet it still casts a pall on Mercy’s exuberance. She can’t remember how long she has ruled their shared body or how many conflicts she has guided it through, unbroken if not unscathed, yet her twin continues to whine and pine for her freedom.

‘Don’t berate the hand that shields you, little sister,’ Mercy chides her prisoner quietly. ‘This life would have broken you long ago.’

The tank lurches to a halt, its hull pinging with sporadic fire. With a whine of servos the rear hatch swings down into a ramp and the muted chatter of battle swells into a cacophony.

‘Purge the xenos filth, Sisters!’ the mistress shouts, cracking her whip.

‘For Throne and Thorn!’ Mercy yells with the others.

As always, she is the first onto the field, clearing the ramp in a single bound. She sees their transport has carried them right to the cracked walls of the xenos bastion. Artillery fire hails down onto the buildings beyond the barrier, shattering bulbous spires and arched walkways forged from what looks like white bone. Thousands of corpses litter the smoke-wreathed ground, along with the gutted shells of tanks. Most are Imperial, for the Thorn Eternal and its Astra Militarum allies have paid a high price to breach the enemy’s eyrie. It is rumoured the Canoness Excruiciant herself has fallen in combat with the aliens’ sorcerous leader. Some even whisper that their order will never recover from this campaign, but Mercy doesn’t much care. If this is to be her finale then she will make it a vibrant one!

The symphony of gunfire is relentless and magnificent – the throaty boom and whoosh of Imperial munitions concatenating with the hiss, whir and whine of the aliens’ more subtle weapons. Mercy glimpses the xenos defenders flitting about the ramparts, their forms slender and deceptively delicate. Their sleek, elegantly fashioned armour and rapid movements lend them an insect-like aspect that amuses Mercy, for they simply beg to be squashed! Aeldari, they are called. She thinks the name has a winsome ring to it, which scandalises her grey sister.

‘Through the breach!’ her mistress bellows.

As they race for the cracked walls a towering automaton strides forth to meet
them. The machine’s lanky bipedal form is armoured with plates sculpted from the same bone-like substance as the bastion, though they are painted a dark crimson. It wields an immense sword in its right fist, the curved blade crackling with arcane force. To Mercy’s eye the xenos giant is nothing short of exquisite.

Howling, she makes straight for the automaton, leaping and swerving as bursts of energy pulse from the gun mounted on its left wrist. Her fellow penitents are cut down to either side, their bodies seared into ruin, her mistress among them. Mercy will miss the kiss of the harridan’s whip, though she has never needed its inspiration.

The construct meets her with a sweeping arc of its sword. She vaults over the whirling blade, but the penitent behind her is cleaved in two at the waist. The energy suffusing the xenos blade cauterises the wound as it passes through, sealing both halves of the woman’s body as they fall. Before her foe can swing again, Mercy’s chainsword strikes its armoured knee – and recoils so violently she nearly loses her grip. In that moment she understands she cannot possibly hurt this enemy, but she is undaunted. There is still fine sport to be had here!

She circles the automaton gleefully, leaping and ducking as it hounds her with its blade. The teeth of her chainsword skitter off its plates whenever she lunges back, but she keeps on attacking, even after her weapon’s engine ruptures and its teeth fall silent. There can be no victory here, only defiance and the delight of surviving another second, but seconds can last forever if played fancifully!

Their dance finally ends when Mercy trips on the torso of her riven Sister. Before she can recover, the automaton seizes her in a huge fist and hauls her into the air. Kicking and hacking at its fingers with her broken sword she is brought before the vast backswept dome of its head. Its only feature is a white crystal set deep in its smooth cranium. The stone glows brightly but strangely, as if the radiance only exists in her eyes. Mercy senses it is alive in some arcane manner, imbuing her enemy with more of a spirit than any machine of the Imperium. The notion tantalises her in ways she cannot fathom and she yearns to shatter that crystal, certain it would be an artful annihilation.

Her captor regards her implacably as Mercy execrates it, then its grip begins to tighten, slow and measured, as if it relishes her doom. Though she knows it is futile, she keeps struggling and cursing, squirming until her hood is torn away and she spits blood-flecked contempt into her captor’s crystallised spirit. Her foe pauses, as though offended.

‘Do it!’ Mercy dares, baring her teeth. ‘But I’ll come back to crack you open!’

For a moment her senses ripple into disorder, violated by strange currents.
‘Qareen,’ her restless sister murmurs through Mercy’s lips. Neither of them knows the meaning of the word, yet ignorant as they are, they cannot deny its rightness.

The automaton relaxes its crushing grip, contemplating her. Fleetingly she senses its thoughts seeping from its spirit gem, like fragments of a borrowed dream. They don’t taste of rage or hate, but puzzlement.

‘Kill me... before you... can’t,’ Mercy’s sister gasps. Like the name, the phrase is familiar, but impossible to attribute – a ghost of something yet to be.

Without warning the automaton hurls her away. She smacks into the ground with a bone-jarring force that topples her from her body’s throne and snaps her sister’s chains.

Rising back into herself, the former prisoner sees a volley of missiles strike the xenos construct, tearing it asunder in a bloom of fire and ruptured plates. Another second in its grasp and she would have been obliterated along with it.

‘Qareen,’ Asenath wheezes through a red haze. ‘Did... you... save...?’ But she has no strength left to finish the question. As darkness creeps over her, she glimpses a smooth porcelain face watching from the shadows.
Chapter Twelve

PURITY

The Requiem Infernal

There is a name to all of this now. It found me as I fell across the threshold into my quarry’s eyrie, pushed by a friend who might otherwise have become a foe.

With the name came insight and the inspiration to continue this hateful work. I was a fool to think I might finish it before I began the end of games, for the task and the trial are as inextricably bound as hope and disappointment, each reflection meaningless without its mirror.

I write what I see, and see a little further whenever I write, seeking answers in questions and answering with yet more! Words make the mind, and in turn the mind makes words that breed the stuff of further words.

Thus the Great Spiral of being ascends, inscribing ever-finier connections.

But our dreams are beset by wickedness and weakness, precipitating dark words and darker worlds, for poison unchecked will always spread. Persisting and prospering long past our mortal span, our impurities multiply across the aeons into monstrosity.

Thus the Dark Coil descends, unwinding ever further into Chaos.

Yet there’s worse to be said about our undoing, for don’t imagine our course is a matter of mortal fallibility and blind misfortune alone. Look deep enough and you’ll glimpse the infernal architect we’ve unwittingly dreamt into being. Search for the signs and you’ll find the Weaver’s handiwork everywhere, plucking the strings of Fate and oiling the wheels of Change to bring us ever closer to ruin.
But beware, traveller, for what’s seen will also see, and once you’ve begun the game there’s no way out except further in, ever deeper until you’re undone. That is the first and final truth of the lie wrought upon us all, and the cardinal sin of the tome you hold in your hands. All is contrived and calculated to further the tale that must tell itself through me, and on through you.

As within, so without, nothing is chance.

Jonah Tythe closed the tome. As he anticipated, its new-found title now graced the blue leather cover, intricately engraved in silver above the jagged rune at its centre. The leech wasn’t quite done with him yet, for the last page was still blank, but it had taken all he had to give for now. The end would come when the game was over.

‘I’m here, Mina,’ he promised his lost sister. Finally here...

But where was here?

Jonah looked up from the book and saw himself looking back, reflected in myriad mirrors, as though he were suspended at the heart of a vast prism. It rotated slowly around him, its facets moving in multiple opposing directions at once, yet somehow maintaining their equilibrium.

The desk he had been sitting at was gone, along with his chair and the writing implements he’d used to satisfy the tome’s hunger. The book was also gone, but he felt its weight against his heart, strapped to his chest under his armour.

Dozens of revolving reflections reached up to touch the hidden book, some with their right hand, others with their left. Countless more joined him in abstaining from the gesture. Most frowned as they noticed the discrepancy, but some grinned, their eyes glittering with madness. A few ignored their misaligned selves altogether, their expressions sober as they contemplated their predicament.

What is this? Jonah wondered, feeling inexplicably calm. Other selves asked the question aloud, in various forms and intonations, some far from calm. That was when he noticed the outward differences between them.

They were all alike in age and facial aspect, for their shared curse was rigid, but they wore their hair in a variety of styles, some disguising its whiteness with dyes. One grimacing reflection sported an orange topknot and spiky facial piercings, while another had braided his hair into sable dreadlocks and hidden his pallor behind make-up. Many covered the scar between their eyes with a headband or hat, but most wore the same blue-and-silver armour as him,
suggesting that whatever their differences, their paths almost always crossed with the Silver Candle. Had they all met an Asenath Hyades too?

‘Where are the others?’ several selves chorused, glancing about for their lost companions, along with Jonah.

_They’re all at the centre of this_, he realised. _Just like me._

Doubtless he appeared as another reflection to these alternates, yet _none_ of them were mere simulacra. All were as real as him.

‘Or as _unreal,_’ the braided incarnation declared as understanding rippled through the conclave. ‘We’re all fancies within a fiction, brothers.’

‘But who’s the liar?’ someone called from overhead, giggling. ‘And who’s the mark?’

‘Where have my tanks gone?’ a higher-pitched voice moaned from below. ‘I brought tanks to this party! He stole all my pretty tanks!’

‘Be silent, heretics!’ a hooded variant admonished, brandishing a golden aquila as he revolved into sight. He was the only one still wearing a priestly habit. ‘Let me pray for guidance!’

‘Take yer ’eads off!’ Orange Topknot roared. ‘Take ’em for her!’ There were tumours clustered around his piercings, as though the flesh had become befuddled in its attempts to heal itself. He spun about inside his facet like a caged animal, hacking at ghosts with a pair of serrated machetes. Like the priest, he was one of the few who wore distinctive garb, his body sheathed in iron-plated leather armour. A bundle of skulls hung from his belt, swinging about with his frenzy. ‘Minaaaaargh!’

As the crowd of lost selves babbled around him, Jonah closed his eyes, trying to think. So many possible incarnations, so many paths taken, yet all leading here…

‘Emprah in there!’ Jonah’s guide says in his broken Gothic, pointing at a hut. _Like all the others in the waterlogged village it is an ugly assemblage of fungal trees and mud, looking more like a mound than a building, but bigger than all the rest. It slouches among its lessers with indolent superiority, just as its inhabitant lords it over the indigenes who have crowned him their king._

_The villagers stand around gaping at their visitor, their sagging, goggle-eyed faces vacant. All are naked, their pasty skin rife with lesions and fungal growths, their bow-legged frames wasted. Even by the standards of this world’s debased people, they are failing. Whatever their elusive monarch may have brought them, it is not health or prosperity. None of the monsters Jonah has hunted over the years have ever provided such things, at least not without a price that undercut_
the gains.

‘Wait for me,’ Jonah orders his guide, then splashes towards the swamp emperor’s hut. A stench of rot hangs over the place, worse than anything he has ever known, but nineteen months among the rancid jungles of this grey-green world have inured him to such things. This has been a particularly long and arduous hunt, most of it spent trawling the tangled rivers at the heart of this continent, but the book – and his instincts – have been insistent that it was too important to abandon.

Jonah ducks through the creeper-hung entrance into near darkness. In the enclosed space the reek is so strong he can feel it on his skin like sticky mist. Something shifts wetly at the back of the hut. Though he sees nothing, Jonah imagines an immense, moist bulk rolling over in its own excretions, like a fattened slug. There is a drawn-out, burbling breath from the darkness.

‘You… him?’ The voice is deep and slime-drenched, exactly as he dreamt it.

‘You… the Mirror Breaker?’

‘I am.’ Jonah has heard the name a few times in recent years, always from people – or things – intent upon killing him. He doesn’t know where it began, but he has learnt not to welcome it.

‘Been waiting… for you... a long time.’

‘I’ve been looking a long time,’ Jonah replies. ‘You haven’t made it easy.’

‘Weren’t... my doing. Ain’t nothing... easy here.’ Despite its corruption, there is a mellow twang to the voice that isn’t native to this planet, and the more it talks the more it flows, as if the speaker is remembering how. ‘Tell me... what’s the year?’

Jonah’s answer is met with a long silence, then a slobbering laugh.

‘Got myself lost... worse ’n I figured,’ the unseen slug muses. ‘Watch yourself, friend! Time runs strange... hereabouts. But maybe that don’t... bother you none.’

‘Why am I here?’ Jonah asks coldly, losing patience. He has no interest in this degenerate’s ramblings and less still in its camaraderie. All he wants are the insights wrapped up in its essence – the meaning that has drawn him to seek it out.

‘That’d be the witch dreams,’ the slug emperor says. ‘Been having a lot of ’em... since the changes took hold. Guess you been hearing me. Hearing my... call.’

‘Tell me I haven’t wasted my time.’

‘Reckon not. Got talking to another dreamer. Old pal... o’ yours... Told me you
got something... for him. A book... right?' There is a wet laugh from the gloom. 'Silver-eyed bastard said... it’d be about finished... after you done your time here.'

It is true. This sour sewer world has provided much inspiration for the book. Jonah has filled many pages while scouring its coils for this creature, for they hide more depravities of sense and circumstance than most worlds could muster over millennia. But right now none of that matters beside his sudden fury.

'Where is he?' Jonah hisses, yanking his Elegy pistol from his belt. Despite the darkness the mirror-kissed bullet in its chamber won't miss a target like this. ‘Now... we’re talking... friend! I got a message... for you... and a price.’

‘What price?’

‘Only what... you’re already offering... to do.’ The slug sighs. ‘I’m done with this!’ There is a liquid swish of limbs in the darkness, as if the creature is making a gesture. ‘But I got no way... to be gone. Keep on... trying... keep on... coming back! Ain’t nothing works... but what you got... in that shooter... yeah, maybe that’ll do it.’

‘You want me to kill you?’

‘I tell you... what Silver Eyes said... and you give it... your best shot. We got a deal... Mirror Breaker?’

When Jonah leaves the hut only one of the arcane bullets remains to him, but it was a fair trade. He finally has a name and destination. ‘Olber Vedas,’ he says, tasting the truth of it. ‘I see you.’

‘As I see you, Jonah Tythe,’ a voice whispers, taunting him across endless possible worlds. A discordant chiming sounds in its wake and indigo light blooms across the sky, spreading to ignite the jungle into a screaming, inky inferno.

A woman walks out of the radiance, her hands extended. ‘This is where our roads part,’ she says. ‘Asenath—’

‘—wait!’ Jonah yelled as his friend pushed him into the annihilating light. His words were chorused by a host of other selves, all tumbling through the same moment towards different shades of fate.

You won't make it! he tried to warn her... again?

An armoured woman caught him as he reeled out of the fading glare, steadying him before he fell. He looked up into calm green eyes and remembered.

‘My thanks… Sister Genevieve,’ he wheezed. ‘Where...?’
‘Inside the Lux Novus,’ Celestian Superior Xhinoa said, stepping alongside her silent Sister. ‘But the schola is not what it was.’

As his fragmented senses settled, Jonah saw they were in a sprawling courtyard. Pillared colonnades ran the length of its walls, their columns carved into robed figures bearing open books, the pages held outwards to display chiselled runes. In place of faces, each of the stone scholars sported a single vertical eye that filled its cowl from peak to chin, its gaze more suggestive of hunger than wisdom.

A mosaic of pink and blue triangular tiles paved the open-topped expanse between the colonnades, radiating from a fountain at its centre. Sculpted from pink marble veined with blue, the fountain was a monstrous abstraction of swirling waves and distended maws, its whorls curling about one another rapaciously. Boiling water bubbled from its multiple mouths, shrouding its pedestal in steam and lending the statue an illusion of rippling, writhing animation. Jonah had witnessed countless horrors on his quest, yet he had never seen anything so viscerally disturbing. The statue was a calculated offence to sanity.

_We won’t be going near that thing_, he decided.

Looking up, he saw a black sky laced with silver threads. Blobs of bright light flitted through the web, their electronic screeches reverberating across the courtyard despite the distance. Every so often the strands chimed and pulsed, staining the vista with indigo light.

‘That is not the Candleworld’s sky,’ Xhinoa pronounced gravely.

‘Nor is this the schola’s courtyard,’ Haruki said, scowling at the cyclopean statues. ‘Not as I knew it.’

‘Not as any of us knew it,’ Xhinoa agreed. ‘Where is Sister Hyades, priest?’

‘She’s… gone,’ Jonah answered quietly.

‘Did the enemy overrun her?’

‘Yes, Sister.’ It was as good an answer as any. ‘I fear they did.’

He turned to face the main gates and found nothing but an unbroken wall. The entrance was gone, as were the insidious, light-filled windows.

‘We cannot leave the way we came,’ Sister Indrik said. The towering Celestian was still carrying the preceptor, who showed no sign of recovery.

‘Was it like this before, Sister?’ Xhinoa asked her comrade.

‘No, but the trap is the same, Sister Superior.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Jonah said, surveying the courtyard again. ‘There’s no going back until Vedas is dead.’ He pointed to the far wall, where several doors
awaited, all painted in different hues. ‘Looks like the only way.’
‘It looks like many ways, Tythe,’ Xhinoa corrected, taking a step forwards.
‘No,’ Indrik warned, blocking her path. ‘Not through the courtyard, Sister Superior.’ She indicated the colonnade to their right. ‘We should cross that way.’
‘Why not the courtyard?’
‘I do not trust it,’ Indrik said bluntly.
Xhinoa considered this, then nodded. ‘Very well, in this tainted place you are our guide, Sister.’
‘Perhaps because she is tainted herself,’ Camille murmured, speaking for the first time. She was slumped against a column, staring at her dead sister’s bolt rifle. ‘Indrik offered us no warning of the attack.’
‘She warned us about the damn windows,’ Jonah said.
‘I share your grief, Sister…’ Indrik began.
‘Do you?’ Camille said, her exquisite features twisting into a sneer. ‘If we are Sisters, why do you hide your face from us?’
‘Enough, Camille!’ Xhinoa snapped, slicing a hand through the air. ‘Sister Indrik was assessed by the Canoness Illuminant herself. Are you questioning our sacred lady’s judgement?’
‘Camille is right,’ Indrik said, lowering her burden gently to the ground. The preceptor’s eyes were still glazed, her lips mouthing something only she could hear.
‘This is not necessary, Sister,’ Xhinoa protested.
‘It is, Sister Superior.’ Indrik reached for the pressure clasps of her visor. ‘There must be no secrets between us. Not in this place.’
Jonah wasn’t sure what he expected to see, but it certainly wasn’t the strong-boned, frosty-eyed visage she revealed. Though Indrik didn’t possess her fellow Celestians’ beauty, she was far from ugly.
‘You are… unchanged, Sister,’ Xhinoa said uncertainly. ‘I do not…’
And then, almost as one, they began to see it.
Beyond a superficial impression, nothing about that face was quite right. The symmetry of every plane was delicately skewed, the proportions of every feature fractionally imbalanced, the irises achingly mismatched – countless tiny details conspireing to render the whole subtly, but irredeemably repellent. And the longer Jonah looked, the more disconcerting the alchemy of errors became, provoking something darker than pity or revulsion.
Such a face could not be countenanced to exist.
‘Now you see,’ Indrik said, raising a hand to her visor.
‘No, Sister,’ Xhinoa commanded, taking her hand. ‘We see, but we do not believe. We are Adepta Sororitas. We look to the heart for purity, not upon the face.’

‘It’s just another lie, Sister Indrik,’ Jonah said, shaking off the shameful loathing. ‘And we’re wise to them now.’

Solemnly, Genevieve laid a hand on Indrik’s breast-plate. A moment later Haruki followed suit. Only Camille held back. Grimacing in disgust, she looked away – and saw the danger.

‘The preceptor!’ she warned, pointing.

The others turned and saw Hagalaz striding across the courtyard, heading towards the fountain.

‘Preceptor, stop!’ Xhinoa called after her, but if the white-haired woman heard, she paid no heed.

‘It still has a hold on her,’ Indrik growled. ‘Don’t!’ she yelled as Jonah and then Haruki ran into the courtyard after the preceptor.

‘Hagalaz!’ Jonah shouted as he raced after her. She wasn’t far ahead and she was only walking yet he couldn’t close on her. It was as if the space between them were distending to keep them apart. ‘It’s a trap!’

Hagalaz glanced back, her eyes glittering. ‘We were wrong, Tythe!’ she replied. ‘It’s not what we imagined!’

_She’s lost_, Jonah realised as she continued her advance. The thought appalled him. Despite her intellect and strength of character, Hagalaz had been the first of them to falter, seduced by the siren lights while a shallow creature like Camille had resisted. What did that say about their chances? Or about _humanity’s_ chances against the greater abyss?

The infernal book quickened against his heart, like a predator scenting prey. There was inspiration in this moment – fresh meaning to be harvested!

‘We are all dancing on the knife-edge of our own understanding,’ Jonah muttered while he ran, unable to stem the impulse to feed the tome. ‘The sharper we grow, the more our path narrows, for knowledge is a double-edged blade, its every cut slicing within and without.’

He felt his words scrawling themselves into the tome, inscribed by his will and the warp alone, just as his most recent entry had been. In this realm, revelation had no need of mortal implements, other than those who dreamt it.

‘The more we see and seek, the more avidly we are seen and sought.’

Something was happening to the fountain. Ripples were coursing through the pink marble as its veins pulsed in time with the sky-web’s beat. The liquid
spewing from its mouths had become a cascade that set the air about it shivering and whistling.

Jonah slowed to a halt and started to back away. Whatever was coming, it was too late to reach Hagalaz. She was only a few paces from her destination now, her voice raised in fervent prayer.

With a whoosh of heat the fountain burst into life, its petrified form erupting into rampant flames. Rising on a skirt of blue fire, the abomination extruded tentacles that ended in snapping, magma-toothed maws. Atop the coruscating column of flame that served as its torso was a shapeless muddle of mouths and eyes that shifted ceaselessly, gnashing and bulging as they devoured themselves and spawned anew.

‘Daemon!’ Haruki shouted, coming to a stop beside Jonah and falling into a defensive stance, her sword angled horizontally over her head.

Hooting and screeching, the beast leapt from its pedestal and surged towards the intruders, its jawed tentacles vomiting streams of polychromatic fire. Hagalaz threw up her arms as it swept over her, though whether to ward it off or revere it, Jonah couldn’t tell.

‘Purge the abomination, Sisters!’ Xhinoa shouted from the colonnade to his right, opening fire with her storm bolter. Her fusillade tore into the daemon, passing through its phantasmal hide and detonating from the heat within. Camille and Genevieve added their bolterfire from the colonnade on the left, Genevieve using Marcilla’s scavenged weapon. The daemon howled, flickering and spewing ectoplasm as the explosions disrupted its cohesion, but its charge didn’t falter.

As it bore down on him, Jonah leapt aside, ducking under a lashing tentacle and spinning round to shoot, pumping bolt-rounds into the beast’s amorphous head.

In the same instant, Haruki sidestepped and hacked at a tentacle. Crackling with energy, her blade sliced through the appendage without resistance, sundering it in a fulminant spray that spattered her breast-plate with flames. The severed limb burst into coloured smoke as it hit the ground, drawing screeches of rage from several of the daemon’s orifices, and hoots of amusement from others. Many of the mouths were torn apart by Jonah’s focused fire, only to reform moments later.

‘Don’t get close!’ he yelled at the Dialogus swordswoman.

Haruki vaulted away as the daemon swept its remaining tentacle after her, but her graceful retreat turned into a stumble as she glimpsed the things growing upon – or rather from – her breast-plate. Where the unholy fire had touched it,
the flak armour had been transmuted into a nest of writhing, razor-tipped tentacles. Her cry of disgust turned to horror as the mutation spread to the inside of her armour and began to burrow into her chest. Dropping her sword, she fumbled at the breast-plate’s straps, her eyes widening in pain.

‘Over here!’ Jonah yelled at the daemon as he fired, trying to draw it away from the beleaguered Dialogus. ‘Here, you bastard!’

It whipped its tentacle round with shocking speed, drenching him in flames. Blinded by their glare, he staggered backwards, his skin prickling beneath the conflagration. He felt the fire’s need to melt and remould whatever it touched, for this was no earthly blaze. His flak-plates oozed away, transmuted into jelly, but his flesh and the gear he’d worn for years were dead to the daemon’s caress, including his leather fatigues, belt and boots. Doubtless all were contaminated by his curse.

*My taint runs deeper than yours,* Jonah thought wildly as the flames died down. Grinning with hate, he tried to fire again, but his pistol squelched in his grip. With a cry of disgust he saw the weapon had become a raw-meat replica of itself. He hurled it away and drew his pistol as the daemon surged towards him again, though he was loath to waste its last, precious bullet.

‘Do your worst!’ he challenged.

A beam of incandescent white energy struck the daemon from the side, obliterating its midriff. It howled as the flaming column of its torso diminished to close the wound, then swung round to confront its attacker as she trained her meltagun on its manifold faces.

‘Truth burns pure!’ Sister Indrik roared, firing again, her beam burning with faith as much as heat. ‘Purity purges true!’

The daemon’s head disappeared in a flare of conflicting energies that sent ripples of turbulence through its entire form. With an explosive hiss it collapsed into a swirl of yellow smoke.

Coughing on the brimstone stench, Jonah hurried over to Haruki. She lay on her back, blood pooling around her head, anemone-like growths blooming from her ruptured eyes and mouth. Her limbs twitched spastically, but he couldn’t tell whether it was due to a vestige of life or the infestation.

‘A foul death,’ Indrik judged as she joined him. ‘You fought bravely, Sister Dialogus.’ Without another word, she incinerated the body’s head and shoulders.

‘Rest easy, Sister,’ Jonah said, picking up Haruki’s fallen weapons. He tested the balance of her sword, impressed by its craftsmanship. All power weapons were rare, but this one was exceptional.
You can’t put it off any longer, he thought, turning towards the preceptor. Hagalaz stood rigidly where he’d last seen her, her arms still raised to ward off the daemon, her back to him. Her flak armour had turned neon pink and there was a strange sheen to her hair and hands. As he approached her, Jonah understood why. While her garments had escaped the daemon’s fire with only a shift in hue, the woman wearing them hadn’t been so fortunate.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jonah said. It wasn’t an apology, but an expression of sorrow.

Preceptor Hagalaz had become a silver statue, a look of surprise frozen on her face. Or was it wonder? Horror? Perhaps even revelation?

‘She is a great loss to the Last Candle,’ Sister Xhinoa said beside him. Jonah hadn’t noticed the others joining him. ‘The preceptor had a puissant soul.’

‘Yes,’ he agreed sadly. They’d hardly been friends, but for a high-ranking member of the Ecclesiarchy, Hagalaz had been refreshingly rational. He’d almost believed she knew what she was doing.

She believed it. That’s why she grew careless and fell.

‘The Archenemy is ever-watchful for weakness,’ Camille pronounced sternly.

‘One moment of laxity spawns—’

‘We should get moving,’ Jonah said. He was in no mood for epithets, especially from a fool.

They crossed the courtyard in silence, alert for traps, yet expecting none, instinctively sensing this place had taken its toll.

Nine simple wooden doors were set into the opposite wall, each painted a different colour, running from white on the far left to black on the far right. None had handles, but they looked fragile enough to force open.

‘Indrik?’ Xhinoa prompted.

‘I have no answer, Sister Superior. I saw nothing like this.’

‘We’ll only get one choice,’ Jonah said, feeling certain of it.

‘And if we choose wrongly?’ Xhinoa asked.

‘I don’t know. Maybe there’s no right answer, just different kinds of wrong.’

Maybe some more painful than others...

‘White,’ Camille said. ‘It is the colour of purity.’

‘Or nothingness,’ Jonah mocked. ‘Do you really expect purity here?’

‘Perhaps black?’ Xhinoa ventured. ‘To match the soul of our enemy.’

‘Another kind of nothingness.’ Jonah shook his head. ‘I don’t like either. Besides, black’s not his colour.’ That would be silver, which wasn’t on offer here.
Genevieve pointed to the door one removed from the black. *Indigo.*

‘Yes… yes, I think you’re right, Sister,’ Jonah mused. He had come to loathe that rich, malignant hue over the years. ‘That’s always been his second stain.’

He led them to the door cautiously, as if he were approaching a venomous serpent. As he drew closer, he became more certain it would offer the most direct route to their quarry, if not the only one. But that didn’t mean it would be easy.

‘I do not like it,’ Camille said, keeping her distance. ‘It is a sinful hue.’

Ignoring her, Jonah placed a hand on the door. He was steeling himself for some kind of feedback – heat… cold… nausea… *something* – but nothing came. *Nothing until you commit,* he guessed. And pushed.

The indigo door swung open, revealing a high-arched passageway painted in the same shade. Inverted glass pyramids hung from its ceiling at regular intervals, crackling softly as they emitted light. Their radiance oscillated languidly between blue and pink, alternately darkening and lightening the corridor’s tone. Triangular recesses lined both walls, their windows looking out onto the silver-webbed darkness that loomed over the courtyard, as if the corridor somehow intersected the sky.

‘We should try the rest,’ Camille suggested uneasily.

‘We cannot,’ Indrik said.

Jonah saw she was right. The other doors were still there, but they were no longer portals. All had become *paintings* of themselves, the texture of the wall showing through their faded pigments. Even Camille refrained from commenting on the strangeness of it. They were long past questioning such things.

‘Our decision is made,’ Xhinoa decreed, approaching the threshold. ‘I pray the God-Emperor’s Light has guided it.’

‘I’ll lead,’ Jonah said. ‘The choice was mine.’

As he stepped into the corridor it distended, as though it were reaching for infinity… then snapped back sharply, like a rubber cord stretched to breaking point then released.

Stumbling, Jonah turned and felt a second rush of vertigo as the passage tilted beneath him. Suddenly he was looking *up* at the doorway he’d come through, the floor under his feet angled into a sheer wall, his body jutting horizontally over the chasm. The entrance had retreated – or ascended? – to a terrible height, as if one stride had carried him a thousand. Gravity tugged at him, somehow held in check by his fear.

*Don’t let go!* Jonah’s instincts screamed.

He felt a thrill of horror when Xhinoa crossed the threshold above, seemingly
stepping into an abyss. Abruptly she swished into a blur that whipped through him with a crack of displaced air. Jonah swung round and the corridor spun with him, tilting back into a sane angle, the wall becoming the floor again.

‘Don’t look behind you,’ he warned as Xhinoa staggered back into being. ‘It’s not something you want to see.’

‘Dangerous?’ she asked, recovering with remarkable swiftness.

‘Only if you look.’

They faced forwards as the others flashed across one by one, Jonah offering each traveller the same warning. All of them heeded it. He suspected Hagalaz would have disobeyed. That had been both her strength and her weakness.

‘The Archenemy twists and turns our virtues into vices,’ Jonah muttered, ‘hanging us by our own hopes.’ With every word a little more of his soul bled into the book.

‘Did you say something, priest?’ Xhinoa asked.

‘I say a lot of things, Sister, but I’m running dry.’ The Celestian frowned at his crooked smile.

*She’s a good leader,* Jonah thought, *but she’s no Asenath Hyades.*

‘Where are we?’ Camille asked, staring at the sky-web beyond the corridor’s windows. From their new vantage point the silvery threads were revealed to be fronds of white crystal, smooth and organically woven into a vast multilevel labyrinth. The lights haunting it had resolved into shimmering discs that whirled between the strands at breakneck speed, their electronic screams much louder here.

‘I believe it is the Sea of Souls, Sister,’ Indrik answered. ‘Some part of it at least.’ Jonah noticed she had lowered her visor again.

‘But are we still in the schola?’ Camille pressed, her expression distraught. ‘These windows… I remember them… yet I feel I shouldn’t.’

It was the violation at work again, Jonah guessed, rewiring the past to fit their enemy’s version of reality. Camille’s Sisters must be feeling it too, but they were made of sterner stuff. It confounded him that this woman had qualified as Adepta Sororitas, never mind a Celestian.

‘Do not think upon it, Sister,’ Xhinoa said. ‘We should proceed.’

They advanced in single file, Jonah leading with the sword and plasma pistol he’d taken from Haruki, Indrik bringing up the rear. The scintillant vista outside shifted with every window he passed. On one occasion he saw the wreck of a large shuttle snarled up in the web. Though its frame was sundered, its mangled weaponry identified it as a military craft. Squinting, he made out the icon
emblazoned on its hull – a robed figure with its arms raised, as if to seize an answer that was now forever beyond reach. Or perhaps not…

*Is this what you were looking for?* Jonah wondered. His companions didn’t comment on the derelict, quite possibly because they couldn’t see it at all. Maybe everyone saw something different in the web – different places, possibly even different times. The Sister Superior was right; it was unwise to look upon it too long.

The temperature in the corridor shifted constantly with the colour of the lights, growing warmer when pink was ascendant then colder when the balance shifted to blue. A scent of old books and fresh ink suffused the passageway, like a scholar’s den. Occasionally whispered voices burbled out of nowhere, earnestly reeling out streams of numbers. After a while the sequences began to materialise, flickering across the air like degraded holo-casts then fading as the party drew closer. Jonah could see no pattern in them, which only encouraged him to keep trying, for the compulsion to solve riddles was as much a part of him as his scar. Besides, it alleviated the monotony of their march.

*They must mean something,* he thought, repeating the numbers under his breath. Evidently the others had come to the same conclusion, for they were muttering the sequences behind him. He felt the book nagging at him, jealous of his inattention, which only made him more determined to solve the conundrum. Even Sister Genevieve had joined the endeavour, her voice as melodious as he’d always imagined it would be. Harmonic, almost…

‘Stop!’ Xhinoa snapped. ‘All of you, be still!’

‘What?’ Jonah asked irritably. He started to turn, then caught himself when the corridor tried to follow.

‘How long have we been walking?’ Xhinoa asked.

‘Does it matter?’ he said, facing forwards. ‘There’s no other way to go.’ Nor any sign of danger. More importantly, he’d been right on the cusp of solving the sequence! In fact…

‘*How long?’*

‘Too long,’ Indrik growled. ‘Many hours, I think.’

*Hours?* Jonah wondered. That couldn’t be right… could it?

‘This is another trap,’ Xhinoa said. ‘A sly one, but no less dangerous for it.’

Jonah felt a soul-deep stab from the book, tearing him away from the numbers before they could take hold again, then another, urging him to *think.*

‘The more eagerly we seek answers, the more avidly our questions devour us,’ he whispered, realisation dawning as he sated the leather-bound leech. ‘You’re
right, Sister.’ This was like the siren lights again, only more insidious. ‘It almost had us.’
‘I thought the numbers were a riddle,’ Camille murmured.
‘One with no end, Sister,’ Xhinoa said.
‘Forgive me, Sister Superior,’ Genevieve said gravely. ‘The Archenemy lured me into breaking my vow of silence.’
‘Which broke me free of the spell,’ Xhinoa answered. ‘It was your voice that revealed the deceit, Sister.’ She hesitated, evidently thinking. ‘We must proceed without paying any heed to these illusions.’
‘That won’t be enough,’ Jonah murmured, gauging the path ahead. ‘It’s going to be too far. That’s part of the trap.’
‘How far can it be?’ Camille asked sceptically.
‘As far as it takes to kill us,’ he said. ‘No… we have to break out.’
‘Into what, priest? The Sea of Souls lies outside the windows!’
‘What are you suggesting, Jonah Tythe?’ Xhinoa asked.
‘I think we have to fall,’ he said, turning to face her. His stomach heaved as the passage swivelled with him. Once again he stood on a sheer wall, the corridor a yawning chasm at his back. He felt gravity clawing at him, demanding surrender.
‘You told me that was unwise,’ Xhinoa said, suspended precipitously above him, but blithely unaware of it.
‘Unwise, but necessary,’ he replied tightly, struggling against his vertigo.
‘You appear distressed, priest.’
‘Would you care to join me, Celestian Superior?’
‘Sacred Light,’ Xhinoa breathed when she turned and saw his perspective. The others followed suit, lining up along the gullet of the chasm with admirable stoicism.
‘We have to let go,’ Jonah told them. ‘Fall through it.’
‘That is madness!’ Camille protested.
‘Maybe, but it’s our only way out.’
‘Are you certain, Tythe?’ Xhinoa urged.
‘Nothing’s certain here, but yes… I think so.’
‘You think?’
‘Perhaps if we solve the numbers…’ Camille began.
‘There is no solution!’ Jonah shouted, his vertigo-frayed patience snapping. ‘We have–’
‘Emperor shield my soul!’ Genevieve declared, opening her arms wide. A moment later her form blurred and swept through those behind her, disappearing
into the chasm.

‘Once again, our Sister of Flames shows us the way,’ Xhinoa said. ‘Camille, you will follow her example.’

‘Sister Superior, I—’

‘That is an order, Sister!’

‘Yes, commander.’ Camille began to pray fervently. Mid- psalm her body shivered out of phase with reality and flashed after Genevieve.

_For all your flaws, your faith is real, Camille_, Jonah admitted.

‘Sister Indrik,’ Xhinoa said expectantly.

‘I cannot,’ the cursed warrior answered.

‘You must, Sister.’

‘I cannot.’ There was a note of horror in Indrik’s voice. ‘If I do I shall lose myself. The taint within me yearns for me… to let go.’

‘Leave us, priest,’ Xhinoa commanded. ‘I must speak with my Sister alone.’

‘Yes, Celestian Superior,’ Jonah said quietly. ‘Don’t wait too long. The trap may close.’

‘Go, Tythe!’

Jonah breathed deeply and surrendered to gravity. It wrenched him into the abyss like a starved beast. The plunge was too fast for sound, yet every fibre of his body howled as the corridor streaked into abstraction – windows, walls and lights instantaneously blurring into one. Time itself rushed to follow, past and future collapsing towards a singularity of perpetual _now_.

_Was I wrong?_ Jonah asked in the moment before questions became superfluous. _Was I—_

‘Would you care to see the reality?’ a dry voice asked.

Yes... No... Yes... No... No... No... Yes... an endless cascade of Jonah Tythes affirmed or denied, each secretly rejecting the answer it gave.

The imminent eternity shattered, fragmenting and reassembling its witness in the blink of a mind. There was no jolt at journey’s end, not even a momentary disorientation. From no-when to now, Jonah simply _was_ once more.

He stood at the bottom of an immense bowl of black glass. A silver spiral corkscrewed out from its centre, the interval between its loops widening as they ascended towards the distant rim, which was swathed in an indigo haze. Nine narrow beams of light pierced the mist, their hue shifting as they roved across the landscape, seemingly at random. The glass shimmered at their touch, fleetingly revealing the intricate symbols etched into its surface. A deep whirring
and grinding resonated from above, underpinned by a strident ticking. *Like a titanic engine*, Jonah imagined.

Sisters Camille and Genevieve were crouched beside him, back to back with their weapons levelled, though there was nowhere for an enemy to hide except the sky. Genevieve had stowed her scavenged bolter in favour of her flamer. Fire guttered at its nozzle as she swept the weapon about watchfully.

With a crack of displaced air Xhinoa appeared alongside them. Mirroring her fellow Celestians, she immediately dropped into a defensive crouch as she gauged her surroundings.

‘Where’s Indrik?’ Jonah asked after several seconds had elapsed without another arrival.

‘Sister Indrik will find another path,’ Xhinoa said, her tone making it clear she wouldn’t discuss the matter.

_Then we’re down to four_, Jonah thought bleakly. Even if Indrik found a way out she would emerge somewhere – and quite possibly some _when_ – else entirely. Whatever her fate, she was lost to them.

‘I _know_ this place,’ Xhinoa declared, running a gauntletled hand over the glass ground. ‘Though I never imagined I would see it from here, let alone touch it.’

‘The dome,’ Jonah said as understanding dawned on him. ‘We’re inside the schola’s dome.’ Right at its apex in fact, as if the building had been inverted, flipping the dome into a bowl. But the sheer size of the thing was incredible.

‘It has… grown,’ Camille said.

‘Or we have shrunk, Sister.’ Xhinoa rose and looked up at the veiled sky. ‘Either way the Shadow Orrery lies directly above us.’

‘Beware!’ Genevieve shouted, gesturing with her flamer. One of the roving light rays was weaving towards them, another close behind it.

‘Don’t let them touch you,’ Jonah warned. For the most part the lights were moving slowly, but their paths were erratic and punctuated by sudden bursts of speed. To assume they were anything other than lethal would be madness.

_The Orrery is casting them_, he realised. _We’re crawling over its shadow map._

As the rays drew closer the party retreated further up the dome’s curve. Bizarrely, Jonah didn’t feel the incline at all. As he ascended, the ground smoothed out under him, as though the dome were _rotating_ to keep him level. Evidently it was the same for the others, for Camille, who was several paces ahead, appeared to be walking at an impossible angle. Such spatial contortions shouldn’t have surprised him anymore, yet familiarity didn’t diminish their visceral offence. The laws of matter weren’t meant to be subjective.
‘The material world is only as steadfast as our conviction in it,’ Jonah offered the book. ‘The less we trust it, the more its coherence diminishes and the closer we come to dissolution.’ He felt the tome editing his observations into the body of its text, tweaking what had gone before with each new insight.

*Yet I still have no idea why.*

He turned as he heard a furious electrical crackling behind him and saw the two beams they’d retreated from converging at the dome’s centre. As they touched, their radiance combined into a hue that made his mind bleed. The melding passed quickly, but their fleeting contact left an object whirling in the air. About the size of a large wheel, it was a spherical abstraction of tortured geometries woven entirely from pink light. Jagged traceries of energy arced about it, accompanied by a babble of delirious laughter. It was both energising and abhorrent to look at, like an inspiration turned in upon itself. A theory twisted into something vicious…

‘Daemon!’ Camille shouted, her voice shrill with revulsion.

‘Wait!’ Jonah yelled as she opened fire. The globe shrieked as her bolt-rounds tore it asunder. As the spectral fragments spun away they shifted hue to blue then surged back together and split into a pair of gyrating pyramids, each half the size of its parent orb. They whirled away in opposite directions as Camille targeted them, zigzagging about to evade her fire and wailing electronically, as if in mourning.

There was a burst of radiance to Jonah’s right as another pair of beams collided and formed a second pink sphere. He incinerated it with Haruki’s plasma pistol before it could swoop away, but the gaseous fragments lingered and turned blue. Xhinoa shredded them as they coalesced into twin pyramids and kept firing as the blue fragments spawned a quartet of small yellow cubes. None escaped her storm bolter’s rapid-fire volley, but another sphere had already formed to their left, and yet another further along. All across the dome the light beams were accelerating, as if to increase the likelihood of convergences. The place would soon be swarming with geometric abominations.

*The Orrery is waking up to us,* Jonah realised. He swung round to hack a pyramid apart as it lanced towards him point first, then immolated its cubes at birth with searing plasma. They exploded with a brimstone stench, mercifully hatching nothing more.

‘We have to get out now!’ he yelled. ‘This fight can’t be won!’

‘To the rim!’ Xhinoa ordered, backing up the incline with her gun blazing. ‘Watch our left flank, priest!’ she commanded as she spun to cover their right.
'Genevieve, ward our retreat!'  
With a whoosh of heat, Genevieve ignited her flamer. Following a few paces behind Jonah and Xhinoa, she cleansed the air with sweeping arcs of fire. The pursuing entities exploded at its touch, their ectoplasm cremated before new horrors could coalesce.  
Up ahead, Camille dropped to a crouch, covering their retreat with precisely aimed shots that even the small, fast-moving cubes couldn’t elude. Whenever her comrades drew near she rose and hurried ahead to take up a new firing position. In the heat of combat she was another person entirely, her marksmanship remarkable.  
*This is why she was chosen,* Jonah judged as Camille sniped three cubes in quick succession, then butted away a twirling pyramid with her weapon’s stock.  
Dozens of the entities were clustered about them now, cackling pink spheres hovering above while wailing blue pyramids and silent yellow cubes flitted about, seeking a chink in their formation, but the party’s discipline kept them at bay. Fortunately it seemed they’d passed beyond the radius of the Orrery’s rays, against which they had no defence but flight.  
‘Patience is our shield, Sisters,’ Xhinoa exhorted them, ‘haste our undoing!’  
As they climbed the dome’s side they slowly brought down its sky, tilting the indigo haze into a wall. Through the veil Jonah glimpsed the immense rings of the Shadow Orrery whirling about, their clockwork symphony much louder now. The temptation to break and run for the rim was strong, but he knew it was folly.  
‘You can wait a little longer, Vedas,’ he muttered, blasting a sphere as it glided overhead. His gun had begun to whine, but it was only when he noticed the smoke rising from his hand that he realised the danger his numb flesh couldn’t convey. The pistol’s casing was cracked and vibrating as its volatile mechanism overheated.  
‘Beware, priest!’ Camille shouted as a pyramid shot towards his face.  
Jonah incinerated it then flung his gun away as it overloaded in a burst of incandescent plasma. Dazzled, he swept his sword up as the slain pyramid’s newborn cubes darted towards him. His blade caught the first, but the second whizzed past to strike the back of Xhinoa’s helm, exploding in an ochre flash that hurled her forwards. Instantly a flurry of cubes swooped down to hammer into her back, detonating impotently against the ceramite of her armour, but throwing her further off balance. Jonah was reaching for her when gravity reasserted its hold on her and she fell, plummeting back towards the dome’s apex. To his eyes it looked as if she were tumbling along a level plane.
‘Celestian Superior!’ Camille cried, rising and firing frantically, all restraint abandoned. Genevieve took a step towards her commander.

‘No, Sister!’ Jonah snapped, sure of the futility of it. ‘Run!’

Xhinoa rolled onto her back, firing one-handed at the horrors swarming above her. ‘Go!’ she bellowed to her comrades. ‘Cleanse the—’

The Orrery’s beams reached her before its guardians, a violet and a viridian ray lancing her simultaneously. There was no blood, fire or corruption. From one moment to the next Xhinoa Aokihara was simply gone.

*My damn fault!* Jonah cursed as he turned and raced for the dome’s rim with Genevieve behind him. Camille fired over their heads, howling imprecations at their pursuers.

‘Above you!’ Jonah yelled. During the distraction a sphere had glided stealthily over her position. Camille looked up as it swooped down to engulf her head, then screamed soundlessly as its pink-stained industry went to work on her. Her eyes bulged, divided then swam, multiplying endlessly as they swirled about the liquecent spiral of her maw, as if her face were swallowing itself. She fell to her knees, her armour quaking with the contortions of the unruly flesh within.

‘The flesh is as weak as its wearer,’ Jonah gasped as he ran, ‘and its wearer as weak as their dreams.’ His book snapped up the notion eagerly.

As he drew level with her, Camille reached for him with a hand that kept coming, erupting through her gauntlet as its fingers branched exponentially. Jonah had no idea if she was pleading with him or trying to attack, but either way there was only one answer he could give.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said as he hewed off the thing’s head, along with the chortling pink sphere that rode it. Genevieve bathed the flailing body in a spurt of fire as she followed him.

‘Mina,’ Jonah gasped as he ran. ‘Vedas.’ The names swung back and forth in his mind with every step. Together they seemed to encompass everything he’d become and might yet be. How long had he been looking – for them, and through them for himself?

‘Longer than you think, Jonah Tythe,’ a familiar, desiccated voice answered as he neared the wall of mist. ‘Come and see for yourself.’

With a swarm of twisted figments cackling and wailing at his back, Jonah leapt into his final abyss.
'Truth is our first and lasting light. Speak only as you see and seek to be, for all else is darkness.'

– The Torn Prophet
The Gospels Illuminant

I

It was the thunder that roused the broken woman and the rain that thwarted her from slipping back into oblivion. The wet barrage coming through the shattered roof above was too insistent to ignore, but not vexatious enough to act upon, so she just lay in the rubble, staring at the lightning-threaded maelstrom. Despite the deluge, the building was smouldering around her, yet even that wasn’t enough to stir her. She was sure her body was smashed beyond repair, though she couldn’t recall why and felt no pain.

‘I am done,’ she told the storm.

‘Your penance is over, Sister Hyades,’ it replied in a woman’s voice, ‘but your life is not.’ The steely, but not unkind tone was achingly familiar. ‘Your body will heal and your soul may follow, in time.’

‘Did we fail?’ Asenath asked, remembering the battle outside the aeldari
bastion and the grip of the faceless automaton about her waist.

‘No, you won,’ the storm assured her. ‘The xenos were destroyed, but your order sacrificed much for the victory. Those who survived are long gone.’

‘They left me behind?’

‘In our care.’ The speaker leaned over her. It wasn’t the storm after all, but a woman in white robes, her ageless, delicate features framed by a wimple. ‘Your wounds were beyond their abilities to treat. The Thorn Eternal is not an order renowned for its healers, unlike my own.’

‘Canoness Sanghata,’ Asenath said, recognising the woman, and with her, this conversation. Both belonged to another time and place, heralding the start of her fourth and finest life, as a hospitaller of the Eternal Candle. After her long and bloodthirsty penitence they had been tranquil years, but they were over.

‘You’re not real,’ Asenath said sadly, finally remembering where she was. And what she had done to her mentor.

‘Who can say?’ Sanghata replied. ‘I feel real.’ She gestured at the encroaching flames. ‘More to the point, this conflagration is certainly real enough to burn you alive if you linger here.’

‘Perhaps that’s for the best.’

‘It is not,’ the canoness said sternly. ‘Your duty remains unfulfilled, Sister.’

‘I fear it’s too late for that.’ Asenath looked away. ‘I am sorry, canoness – for all my sins, but most of all for you.’

‘Then you remember it, Sister?’

‘The bitch showed me while she ran wild,’ Asenath said, remembering Mercy’s glee when she had revealed the memory. The betrayal had been her barbed farewell to the Eternal Candle – a lethal neurotoxin sneaked into Sanghata’s wine at their last supper before Asenath’s departure. Slow-acting and undetectable, the poison murdered under the guise of a degenerative disease. Her twin had perfected the recipe over the years, slipping it to those who passed through her care whenever the whim took her.

‘Perhaps I found a cure,’ Sanghata said. ‘Unless I am truly a phantom.’

‘Are you?’

‘I have no idea. Either way, I absolve you, Asenath Hyades.’ Sanghata’s hands wove an aquila. ‘We are not responsible for the sins of our shadows. Now get up!’

Shame compelled Asenath to try. To her surprise her body obeyed without complaint. Indeed, other than a few cuts and bruises it was wholly intact, the debt of her twin’s excesses erased. If only the same could be said for the toll they
had taken on her soul.

*Where are you, Mercy?* she asked, wondering at her sister’s silence.

‘The hellion is licking her wounds,’ Sanghata replied. ‘But she will soon return. This tainted storm empowers her. Don’t surrender to her again, Sister. If you do, it will be the last time.’

‘Is she a daemon?’

‘Only if you let her loose.’ Sanghata offered a steely smile. ‘But you won’t, my friend.’

‘No,’ Asenath promised. She appraised her surroundings and saw she was in a ruinous hall, standing amid the debris of display cases. There was no sign of the beast that had burst through the roof, which was unsurprising since most creatures of the warp vanished after death, but there were many mortal bodies among the wreckage.

Intoning a prayer of mourning, Asenath stripped the robes from a corpse to cover herself, for Mercy’s exploits had left her naked.

‘How can I end this blasphemy?’ she asked, turning to her mentor, but Canoness Sanghata was gone, if indeed she had ever been there.

*You can’t... end it,* her twin murmured from somewhere deep down. *Too late... too far...*

Perhaps that was true, but it wouldn’t deter her. Mercy’s voice had reminded Asenath of her dream and the salvation at its end. She knew where she had to go.

It was the light that drew the unquiet dead, calling them to the mountain at the heart of the Ring like profane moths to a flame.

Like his fellow plague-dammed, the ghoul in the black greatcoat saw the beacon as a white fire shining through everything else. As he walked alongside the others, his metal leg dragging, he yearned to reach out and touch the light, but it slipped away whenever he tried. Its purity filled him with a longing so insatiable it soon soured into loathing, for it mocked him with hope where none existed. That pain was worse than all the torments of his rotting body. The only way to end it was to extinguish the light.

And so the dead marched, following their towering master’s lead. The world sometimes parted before the pale giant, opening up secret pathways for the procession to slip through, which sped their crossing immeasurably. They would walk for a stretch then pass through an invisible tear and continue their pilgrimage further along. Instinctively the ghoul sensed they were walking along cracks in the world’s skin, following a path mapped out by suffering, for that
was where the rifts clustered.

The storm grew ever fiercer as they ascended the mountain towards the city it harboured. A tornado whirled among the burning buildings, smothering their flames as it mangled them, only to ignite fresh conflagrations with spasms of coloured lightning. Sometimes the bolts sired twisted forms that scampered or crawled across the rooftops. On one occasion, a thrice-struck tower shuddered into glistening life. Squealing in shock, it extruded silver-tiled pseudopods and slithered away.

The black-coated ghoul cared nothing for such sights. No matter what twisted wonders sprang forth before him, his eyes quickly returned to the mocking light.

As the procession reached the city’s outskirts it was joined by more of the plague-damned, all anointed by his master’s kindred heralds or their first-spawn. Dimly the ghoul understood there were four others like his master, all spreading the sacred stain across the land, though none were as exalted. That knowledge was woven into his blood by the taint and heightened by the self-awareness his master had left him. A spark of sentience flickered in all the dead – for how else could they taste and hate the light with vigour? – but the black-coated ghoul was different, his thoughts sharper and wider-reaching than those of his brethren. He even recalled his name…

*Lemarché.*

The ghoul tried to say it aloud, but the trick eluded his swollen tongue, resulting in a brutish gurgle. Like the light, the name was a deceiver – a cruel relic of something best forgotten. And yet he couldn’t let it go. There was something precious about that particular pain. As he toyed with it, another name surfaced from the sludge of his memories. No… not a name. A purpose? A calling?

*Commissar.*

The shame the word brought was harder to bear than his name, yet equally indispensable.

*I failed... my duty,* the creature thought.

But what was *duty*?

The ghoul howled with the others when one of the heralds fell. *The Bleeding Angel, brought down by giants in shimmering armour...* Though she perished on a distant spire her passing rippled through the horde, carried by the virulence that bound them. But in the wake of the ghoul’s sorrow there came another thought, furtive and insistent – *they can be killed.*

‘*The Perihelion has fallen. Seek refuge on the spires, but beware Veritas and*
Clementia. We offer sanctuary on Vigilans. Throne ward you! The Perihelion has fallen. Seek refuge—’

Avram Santino killed the vehicle’s vox as the message cycled again. It had been playing on all channels for hours, delivering its warning in a deep, refined voice.

‘What do you make of it?’ he asked the woman sitting beside him in the idling medicae truck.

‘I cannot say, trooper,’ Mother Solanis said, staring through the windshield at the distant fire above. ‘But my city burns.’

After their flight from the Sacrasta they’d stopped at the foot of the mountain, unsure how to proceed, especially since they weren’t alone anymore. Santino had found three initiate hospitallers hiding in the vehicle, all scarcely more than children. Sister Claudia, the eldest, claimed they had fled there when the horror began.

Later, as the truck was crossing to the Perihelion, they’d run into – indeed very nearly over – the aging, half-blind Hospitaller Madeleine, who tended the bridge’s shrines, which brought their number to six.

Santino felt responsible for every one of his passengers. Somebody had to live through this damn night.

‘We can’t risk the city,’ he said. ‘How far to Vigilans, Mother Superior?’

‘In this weather… four, perhaps five hours,’ Solanis answered, ‘but the Watchspire is a strange place, trooper.’

‘How so?’

‘It does not fall under the Last Candle’s purview.’ Solanis shook her head. ‘The Canoness Illuminant negotiated its… transfer… shortly before she was lost. I am not privy to her reasons, but visitors are prohibited.’

Santino frowned. ‘So who runs things there?’

It was young Claudia who replied, her voice rapt: ‘The shining ones.’

Asenath hurried through the storm-ravaged city, dashing between doorways and discarded vehicles, but her best cover was the tide of humanity surging through the streets alongside her. Most of the citizens of Sophia Argentum were intent upon the same destination as herself, seeking the sanctuary of the cathedral atop the Perihelion. Some wailed prayers or curses as they fled, but most were silent, their faces slack with shock, their eyes fixed on the blessed beacon light.

A gale howled around the crowd, filling the air with stinging dust and debris. Occasionally it swelled into savage gusts that threw folk from their feet or dragged them into the air, legs kicking as they whirled into the sky.
Hard, black rain pounded down through the squall, pooling ankle-deep in the streets and flooding the alleys, where the water began to slither with a life of its own. In some places it reared up into torrential pillars that lashed out and swallowed those who stayed too close.

And then there was the many-coloured wildfire spreading through the city. For the most part it didn’t consume its host buildings, but clung to them like a scintillating weed. The wind and rain winnowed, but never quite doused it, as though the elements were colluding to orchestrate the city’s doom.

Roving beyond the mountain’s summit, the whirling leviathan of Calliope reigned supreme, its tail whipping everything about it into ruin. Nebulous eyes and mouths crawled along the tornado’s length, dissolving as fast as they formed, while sleek shadows darted around it, their shapes all too familiar to Asenath. Screaming over the gale, the storm beasts regularly swept down to snatch up citizens and carry them into the maelstrom. One was ridden by a crescent-headed nightmare whose immense, tubular fingers sprayed prismatic fire across the crowd, its touch sculpting obscenities from their flesh.

*Some horrors come to feed on our fall, others merely to carouse,* Asenath thought bitterly. *We are nothing but meat or clay to them.*

She skidded to a halt as screams rippled through the crowd. People were hurling themselves onto the citizens from the ever-burning rooftops to either side of the street.

*Dead people,* Asenath realised as one of the cadavers fell beside her. Fire guttered about the corpse as it thrust itself to its knees and grabbed her robe in a charred claw. She kicked out at its face and broiled grubs spilled from its eye sockets, but its grip held firm. A burly man crushed its skull with a craftsman’s hammer and she broke free.

‘This way!’ he yelled, making for a side alley.

‘No!’ she warned as the pooled water sucked him down.

*I can’t help any of them,* Asenath realised, appalled by her coldness.

Turning, she saw more of the dead wading into the crowd from behind, cutting off their retreat. A bloated slug-like abomination loomed over the damned, its shapeless head crowned with a nest of pipe-like tentacles that spewed slime as they waved about. Its fanged maw grinned inanely under a medley of idiot eyes as the beast sloshed forwards, squashing walking corpses in its eagerness to reach the living. People shrieked when they were drenched in its vomit, then quickly silenced as their flesh and souls suppured.

*Let me loose, sister!* Mercy cried, surging awake.
‘No!’ Throwing up her arms, Asenath pushed past the mob to the nearest building and hurled herself through a window. Landing in a scatter of glass, she rolled to her feet and ran through the room, leaping over burning, yet perfectly intact furniture. The flames tittered coyly as she passed them, giving off no heat.

In the room beyond she found a family sitting around a table, their bodies enveloped in crystallised azure light. Their expressions showed the barest hint of distress, as though they had been frozen in the first moment of the catastrophe.

_It’s too much to bear, is it not? _Mercy wheedled. _But I’ll carry the misery if you like._

There was a crash of masonry as something tore into the room Asenath had just vacated, followed by a slobbering, plaintive mewling.

_The beast has our scent, sister!_

Ignoring her twin, Asenath hurried through the building and hauled open a window on the far side. The street outside was empty, but she gauged the waterlogged ground suspiciously. Was it deep enough to be dangerous? Another crash behind her decided the matter.

The water curled hungrily about her ankles as she splashed into it, but lacked the substance to drag her down. Tearing free, she fled up the street as her pursuer wailed behind her.

‘Look to the light,’ Asenath gasped, making it a mantra as she ran.

Her eyes instinctively sought and found the cathedral at the mountain’s summit. Its minaret soared above the rooftops, its light a beacon in the maelstrom. While it shone, hope remained.

The hateful light was much closer now. The pain it brought grew stronger with every step the dead took, but that only goaded them on. There were no more secret paths to follow, for none existed near the summit. Though the final leg of their march was slow, it was also fruitful because the city was ripe with converts.

By the time the procession reached the inner precincts its master strode at the head of a great throng, the lost souls of the Sacrasta swollen by thousands of lesser plague-damned. Their numbers grew with every street they passed through, and not just with the dead, for the storm had opened the way for more elemental things.

Tumescent slime daemons slithered among the walking corpses, their tentacles squirming as they sprayed bile in their excitement. Clouds of flies buzzed about them, heedless of the danger, for the beasts would regularly flick their fat tongues about and catch hundreds on the sticky organs, then draw them back into
their maws. Their feasting didn’t thin the vermin, for more hatched constantly from the daemons’ hides.

Overhead, immense chitin-covered monstrosities hovered on leathery wings, their bulbous heads swivelling about as their prehensile tongues lapped at the scalps of the plague-damned below. Occasionally they would succumb to their appetites and strip a head of its flesh, leaving the victim to stumble on with a slime-slick skull between its shoulders.

Some daemons were spawned from the dead themselves, growing into their decaying flesh as they marched. A chosen one would tremble as its skin deepened to a livid green then suddenly ruptured, unable to contain the ripening organs beneath. Its belly would then swell and spill its entrails, which hung about the creature’s legs like morbid tassels. Then the proto-daemon would howl as its eyes popped to make way for a single rheumy orb – then howl again when a horn erupted from its skull, often so long and twisted that its bearer was bent beneath the weight.

Shortly after the transformation was complete each of the horned daemons would begin to count in a low drone, hesitantly at first, then with increasing conviction. The ghoul in the black greatcoat believed they were keeping a tally of something important, though he didn’t know what.

One by one his former comrades submitted to the benediction, for they were the most worthy of the plague-damned. Their elevation filled the ghoul with pride, yet when his own turn came he fought back, denying the blessing.

‘Lemaaah,’ he groaned repeatedly. ‘Com… saah.’ Though the words were garbled they had power, shielding their speaker from the transformation. And the longer he endured as himself, the more certain he became of his secret imperative.

His duty was not yet done.

The Candelabrum was besieged by the lost and the damned who had once worshipped beneath its silver minaret. Thousands of plague-ravaged citizens pressed against the marble walls that enclosed the cathedral’s grounds, with more constantly shambling from the city below. In some places piles of squirming bodies had formed against the barrier, as the feral dead clambered over each other in their eagerness to reach the light that lay beyond.

Battle Sisters and Candlewards manned the ramparts, the armoured women culling the horde with bolterfire while their lesser brethren supported them with crossbows, scrupulously targeting the ghouls’ heads. Red-crested Dominion
Sisters roamed the walls, bringing the cleansing heat of their flamers or meltaguns to bear where they were most needed. An autocannon turret coughed furiously above the gatehouse, its rapid-fire fusillade cutting swathes through the attackers. But despite their numbers the ghouls were the least of the horrors assaulting the cathedral.

Crouched on a rooftop just below the summit, Asenath saw huge insects flitting about the ramparts, harrying the defenders with darting strikes of their proboscises. They struck with frightening accuracy, latching on to heads with whiplash licks. Sometimes they yanked their victims from the walls, but more often they released them among their comrades, decapitated and spewing clouds of flies from torn necks.

One of the flying vermin was ridden by a female figure in scarlet robes. The heretic appeared to be directing the attack, her six arms gesturing sinuously as she flitted back and forth along the wall. Something about her was familiar, but she never lingered in one place long enough for Asenath to see her clearly.

Even worse than the insects were the slug-like abominations slobbering against the barrier. Their glutinous hides adhered to the marble, enabling them to creep up the walls with ghouls clinging to their backs. Only the heavier weapons of the Dominions were potent enough to purge them, but the red-crested Sisters were too few to entirely stem the incursion.

Asenath cursed as one of the beasts flopped onto the ramparts, crushing a Dominion under its bulk as she arrived to repel it. The Candlewards to either side screamed as its tentacles sprayed them with corrosive filth. Seemingly delighted by their attention, the creature rolled back and forth over them until another Dominion incinerated it with a white-hot beam.

*That toy fortress won't last long,* Mercy observed playfully.

Asenath knew she was right. The Iron Candle lacked the numbers or resources to withstand this onslaught. There were no elite Seraphim or Retributor squads among its ranks, let alone any significant armoured support.

‘We never believed war would find us,’ she whispered.

*Haven't you heard? It gets everywhere!* Mercy mocked. *So what now, sister?*

‘I need to get through,’ Asenath said, gazing at the cathedral’s minaret.

*Even I’d be hard-pressed to manage that trick, but I’ll try if you ask nicely!*

‘Why did you kill her?’ Asenath asked suddenly, picturing Sanghata.

*Why wouldn’t I?* Mercy said, seeing the picture. She sounded genuinely surprised. *That dullard clipped our wings and doused our fire!*

But Asenath wasn’t listening. A procession of the damned had entered the street
below, marching towards the cathedral. At its head was a blindfolded giant, his naked form corded with muscles. He was unmistakably the Blind Watchman of Vigilans, but beneath that mythic figure she recognised another, more poignant one.

‘Feizt,’ she breathed.

You failed him, sister; Mercy taunted, seeing it too.

‘Yes,’ Asenath confessed, remembering the sergeant’s plea for death. ‘I fear I did.’

But Feizt wasn’t the only one she had failed. Behind him marched a coterie of gangling one-eyed monstrosities, their flesh hanging loosely on their bones. Among them was a figure in a filthy black greatcoat and a high-peaked cap. Though it walked in a limping shuffle it somehow kept its back straight, maintaining a semblance of dignity.

Commissar Lemarché.

Asenath was surprised by the sorrow that realisation brought, then horrified as she recognised the hospital coveralls worn by his fellow damned.

Well, they were a fine waste of time to patch up and pander to, Mercy opined.

‘No,’ Asenath said solemnly. ‘You are wrong. Nothing is without purpose.’

II

Jonah plummeted into a pandemonium of roaring light and blinding noise, his senses intertwining into nonsense as they soared free of all constraint. He smelled the rush of air as he slipped between titanic hoops that whirled about him like curved blades, and tasted the anomalies their motion spun from nothingness. He saw bittersweet contradictions that screamed to be – then heard them spin away into lurid oblivion. The cacophony vibrated through his blood, urging it to burn and blur his flesh afresh in pursuit of new possibilities. Misconceived phantasms flickered around him, giggling and wailing as they oscillated in and out of being, dreaming as they were undreamt to make room for more and more and…

The kaleidoscope of absurdity ended abruptly, ceasing at the precise instant Jonah’s sanity reached breaking point. The clockwork clamour receded, and with it the barrage of impressions. As his reeling mind settled, he tried to make sense of his surroundings, though reason railed against the attempt.

He stood at the rim of an immense disc of silver-veined crystal that hung in a void, rotating slowly. Far beyond the platform’s perimeter vast metal rings
revolved up and down, their concentric bands weaving a lattice across the horizon. He could only make out the first three clearly, but knew there would be nine, for he had seen a simulacrum of this machine once before.

‘*Even diminished, the infinite remains absolute,*’ his nemesis had said in the Torn Shrine when Jonah was mesmerised by this machine’s likeness. That was true, but it hadn’t prepared him for the *undiminished* reality. To see *that* was to know the insignificance – the sheer futility – of all human endeavour. Perhaps the Last Candle’s orrery had served as this infernal engine’s seed, but he doubted any of its disciples would recognise it now.

_I fell through them_, Jonah realised, staring at the spinning rings. The probability of slipping between them all without being struck and pulverised was surely infinitesimal, yet he wasn’t surprised he had. He was meant to be here.

‘Sister Genevieve!’ he shouted, scanning the crystal plane and finding nobody. Evidently the machine had rejected her. ‘I’m sorry, Sister. I should have come alone.’

The platform’s only feature was a narrow spindle rising from its centre, woven from the same crystal as the ground. Nine large prisms gyrated about it, gliding through the air as they projected rays of coloured light into the caged sky.

‘Where are you, Vedas?’ Jonah challenged as he walked towards the spindle. ‘Why draw this out any longer?’ He yanked the tome out from under his fatigues and held it aloft, like a holy text. ‘I have your book!’

The plane shimmered as its threads lit up with indigo light. By that unveiling radiance Jonah saw he was no longer alone. Hundreds of people knelt on the plane ahead, gathered in nine concentric circles around the spindle, each group smaller than the last. Their faces were tilted upwards, their arms outstretched to link hands with their neighbours.

_The book is yours,_ the throng intoned, its chorus vibrating through the crystal rather than the air. _It always was._ The voices were male and female, young and old, but their icy tone was unvarying. There was no mistaking the mind behind them. _Through your eyes, by your hand and with all your heart,_ they continued, _your world in your words, Mirror Walker._

Jonah halted, squinting at the figures. They were too far away to see clearly, but their stillness was inhuman. ‘You tricked me!’ he shouted.

_‘I answered you,’_ the congregants replied. _‘I gave you what you needed._

‘I just wanted to be paid, you twisted bastard!’ Jonah stormed forwards, his anger rising so fast it startled him. ‘I just wanted off my night-shanked world!’

_‘Irrelevant. It is needs, not wants that fuel the soul.’_
‘Don’t tell me my own damn mind!’

‘I speak only as I see,’ the chorus pressed, ‘just as you have done with blood, quill and spirit, my friend.’

‘I’m not your friend!’

‘And yet I am yours, for we share the same ordeal, Jonah Tythe. Suffering forges the most potent of bonds, especially when embraced willingly.’

‘I didn’t ask for any of this!’

‘You asked why.’

‘What?’ Jonah frowned, his fury blindsided.

‘Why,’ the chorus insisted. ‘Why did your world die? Why your sister? You needed to make sense of Chaos, Jonah Tythe. I gave you the tools and the tenacity to make the attempt.’

As Jonah neared the first ring of supplicants he saw their white garments were embroidered with the Candlelit Eye of Truth. It seemed the schola’s staff and pupils hadn’t shared the fate of Veritas’ other inhabitants, but neither had they been spared. Every face bulged with a single eye framed by wattles of flesh formed from the detritus of the original features – nose, lips and cheeks thrust aside to make room for greater sight. Vast and unblinking, the throng of cyclopean eyes stared upwards.

Following their gaze, Jonah saw the void above was afire with a maelstrom of imagery – a jagged aggregate ooze of metaphors made sentient, every one tormented by its own significance. Signs of wonders unsung vied with malign portents of dark songs yet to come, convulsing as they mingled and mismatched in rampant disharmony. It was the geometry of the soul flayed bare, every spark of spite incited to tell its tale, every flaw adored and invited to dance.

‘There is a pattern there,’ the congregants chanted without mouths. ‘A logic that governs the ebb and flow of the immaterium’s tides, but an architect must search deep and wide to recognise it before he can build anew.’

That’s why you needed more eyes, Jonah guessed, remembering how his enemy – an addict, never an architect – couldn’t look away from the machine. Doubtless these slaves were all bound to Vedas, every fibre of their being attuned to their task, but even with their extra faculties in play – even with hundreds, thousands or even millions more like them – it was hopeless.

‘The Candleworld offers a singular perspective on the conundrum,’ the throng chorused. ‘It resonates with the Sea of Souls like no other place I have known. That is why symbols have such potency here. That is why they may incarnate and walk among men. I felt it the moment I set foot on the
Perihelion. This entire continent is a lens onto the sublime, the orrery its focal prism.’

“You’re wasting your time,’ Jonah said, tearing his eyes away from the grand malevolence playing out above. ‘You’ve been staring into a cesspool.’

‘Then it is the cesspool of our souls!’ There was a collective, humourless laugh. ‘But you are wrong. Where you see Chaos, I glimpse Order.’

‘You’ve been looking too long.’

‘Long enough for your statement to have no meaning. Time is not what you imagine it to be.’

‘One hundred and thirty-one thousand and sixty-nine days,’ Jonah said bitterly. ‘I didn’t imagine any of them.’ He’d begun the count on the night his hunt began, but this was the first time he’d said it aloud.

‘Three hundred and fifty-eight years,’ the chorus responded, converting the figure without hesitation. ‘Gone in the blink of an awakened mind.’

‘I felt everydamn one of them!’

‘They would be meaningless if you did not. I feel the weight of mine also, extended across every permutation of myself – a manifold of perceptions mirrored into infinity, abiding without end. Nothing is ever lost.’

‘Then where is she?’ Jonah demanded, striding to the first circle of congregants. To his disgust he saw their linked arms were fused at the hands, forming a permanent chain. ‘Where’s my sister? What did you do to her?’

‘I did nothing.’

‘The truth!’ Jonah roared, bringing his sword down on a pair of bonded hands. The blade crackled with energy as it hewed through flesh and crystallised bone. The riven arms shattered as if they had been frozen, spilling iridescent ectoplasm rather than blood. Fracture lines crawled up the congregants’ splintered shoulders, yet neither one reacted. Snarling, Jonah beheaded the one on the left then spun to decapitate the other. The dead thralls remained kneeling, their fissures spreading to the slaves beside them. With an explosive crack their neighbours’ heads shattered like glass and the chain of destruction continued to the next pair, sweeping through the circle in both directions.

‘No more lies!’ Jonah shouted, striding towards the second circle of devotees. ‘Tell me the truth or I’ll take them all down!’

‘It will change nothing,’ the chorus said, unmoved by the carnage. ‘I did not bring death to your world, Jonah Tythe.’ A pause. ‘Or to your sister…’

Jonah froze, his sword raised. ‘Mina is dead?’ It came out as a whisper.

‘As you have always known, but never accepted.’
‘That’s not… It’s not…’
‘**Look and see for yourself.**’
‘No… I–’
‘**Look!**’ the chorus commanded.

There was never a choice. Jonah looked up into the firmament, and the truth that had been stalking him leapt.

‘Wait,’ Jonah says as the past enfolds him, drawing him back to the night-bound hive. ‘Don’t go out tonight.’
‘I’ll be back before lockdown,’ Jonah answers. He slots a clip into his handgun, keeping his back to the woman sitting by the shuttered window of their room in the hab-block. Mina has never liked guns.

‘It’s a bad night,’ he warns himself then smiles at the absurdity of it. Guilt follows immediately, for his sister deserves better. None of this is her fault.

‘I saw him again,’ he says as he stubs out his lho-stick then turns questioningly to his sister. She is a pale shadow in her chair, drained of all colour by the endless night, yet to him she is inviolate.

‘Who did you see, Mina?’ Jonah asks gently.
‘The starving man,’ he replies, fiddling with her rosary beads. ‘His face is always in shadow, but I can see his eyes. Silver eyes. He’s closer now.’

‘Silver is a mark of purity,’ he says, crossing the room to take her hands in his own. They are so cold and brittle that it breaks his heart. She has refused to eat or move at all since the night fell. ‘Perhaps you’ve dreamt of one of the God-Emperor’s Space Marines.’

‘A Space Marine?’ he asks. ‘Do you really think so?’

‘Has to be,’ he answers, pulling away, for he can no longer bear her glacial touch. ‘I have to go now, Mina.’

‘She died on the first night,’ Jonah said hollowly, closing his eyes as he saw the truth of it. His sister had been one of the Sacred Damned, dead but free from the ravages of decay.

*I kept her safe. Alive. But only ever in my mind…*

‘**Self-deception is the most insidious of traps, my friend,**’ his enemy chorused.

‘**Nothing blinds us so inventively.**’

‘But she was gone.’ Jonah shook his head, remembering what he’d found after his assignation at the shrine – the empty room, the pile of discarded clothes and the message spelled out by Mina’s rosary beads: *Finish it.*

‘Liar,’ he snarled, hacking into another pair of conjoined hands and triggering a
second chain of destruction. ‘She was gone!’

‘Are you certain of that?’
‘You left me a damn message,’ Jonah said, passing through the second circle of congregants as it collapsed. ‘Baited me!’

‘No. You found what you expected. What you needed to spur yourself to destiny.’
‘You’re lying!’ As Jonah hewed through the third circle his rage uncoiled like a burning serpent. This time flames danced about his blade when it struck, scorching his victims into charcoal statues. ‘You set me up!’

‘I heard your call in the firmament and recognised you, Mirror Walker.’ The chorus was growing thinner as its numbers diminished, but there was still no trace of concern in its tone. ‘I answered and gave you purpose.’
‘Don’t, brother,’ a quiet voice warned as Jonah reached the fourth circle. ‘This is what he wants.’
‘Don’t care,’ he spat, tasting ash. His blade whirled down in an arc of fire, setting another pair of devotees ablaze. The conflagration surged through their circle, turning its living links into burning pyres. As they died the crystal beneath them darkened to an igneous black, its veins shifting hue to crimson.
‘Jonah, please–’
‘You’re dead, sister,’ Jonah said as he strode forwards, his eyes fixed on the spindle. ‘So is he.’
There was nobody left to save and nothing to hold on to except fury.
‘Burn,’ the Mirror Walker hissed, cleaving the fifth circle.

The building under Asenath shook as a deep vibration rumbled through the city. With a peal of thunder, bloody smears splashed the clouds and the tornado swirled aflame. The storm daemons swimming closest to it burst into fire and spun from the sky, trailing smoke as they dissolved. Among them was the crescent-headed rider she had spotted earlier, though it vanished in a flurry of twinkling glyphs as its mount fell.

This is a new chord in our rhapsody, Mercy thrilled. A wrathful one!
‘Yes,’ Asenath agreed, but her attention remained on the armies clashing at the summit. From her vantage point on the roof, she saw the contingent of corrupted Breachers had almost reached the cathedral’s perimeter wall. They were advancing through a barrage of fire towards the gates, their leader’s arms spread wide, as if to embrace the incoming bullets, but somehow blunting their potency.
‘What happened to you, Toland?’ Asenath murmured.
As the former sergeant neared the gatehouse, three of the huge insects dived towards its defending turret, striking from different angles. The turret blasted one from the air then swung to shred another, but the third crashed onto it and erupted in a shower of bile, its bulk draped over the cannon’s muzzle. A gaggle of diminutive beasts tore their way out of the carcass and squeezed their globular forms through the turret’s viewing slits.

‘The gates will fall,’ Asenath predicted. Whatever she hoped to do, it must be soon, yet she could see no way through the horde. At least none that was sane.

‘Do you want to live?’ she asked, rising.

:Set me free and I’ll show you how!\:' Mercy shot back.

‘No, we’ll go together or not at all,’ Asenath said, and leapt from the roof.

The black-coated ghoul limped towards the gatehouse as bullets sprayed the procession of chosen ones. Many thudded against him and burst into red dust from the impact, their shells corroded by his master’s scorn. With the turret silenced, only the weapons of the red-crested warrior women posed a serious threat, but they had been drawn away by the other heralds. Each of the three commanded its own force of plague-spawn, their assault spread along the ring wall.

Through the surface scum of his thoughts, the ghoul appraised the battle with a soldier’s eye and saw the tipping point was imminent.

‘Comsaaah!’ he moaned, though the word brought nothing but misery.

He looked up as the sky thundered and turned red. The rain had begun to steam, scalding his skin. Though he scarcely felt the heat, something inside him rallied to the call of that fiery sky, drawing strength from its rage.

Blood-tight, he remembered suddenly. On the back of that memory came another so tenuous he lunged for it before it evaporated.

‘Voy-seee,’ he groaned, thrusting a hand into his coat pocket. His fingers found a cold metal orb.

Grinning, the Mirror Walker hacked through the sixth circle of devotees, igniting another ring about the spindle. As the thralls’ eyes erupted, shards of their master’s memories spiked his own, unveiling…

A dreamer betrayed by the weight of his own ambition, and then by the woman he has bound in service to a false crusade, bringing them both...

Down...

A blinded fool walking into a wilderness colder than anything nature can conjure, yearning for annihilation, but impervious, for his heart beats even
colder.

Down...

A lost soul wandering the labyrinth of its own delusions made manifest, taunted by its own arrogance and ignorance and finding no way forwards but...

Down!

Wading through the torrent of his enemy’s misery, the Mirror Walker reached the seventh circle and raised his sword. Smoke wafted from his mouth as he spat his contempt and made the cut.

Crimson lightning slashed the sky, leaving a bleeding wound in the clouds. The twister roared and hurled balls of fire across the mountain. Unlike the whimsical conflagration already tormenting the city, they incinerated everything in their path, raking charred swathes through the damned and scorching buildings into husks.

Spiny daemons sprang from the rubble, their elongated skulls whipping about as they bounded towards the summit on reverse-jointed legs. Their gangling frames were sheathed in red scales and their eyes flickered like caged infernos, marking them as children of the firestorm. Bellowing like beasts they fell upon the plague-damned with claws or serrated swords, their slaughter only slowed when they encountered one of the pestilential daemons.

‘The final veil falls aflame!’ Mercy declared as the conjoined twins landed on needle-pointed feet. Their shared body was still in the throes of change, its muscles twisting as its limbs stretched and remoulded themselves.

‘Down!’ Asenath yelled, throwing them to the ground. A fireball whooshed overhead and engulfed the building they’d just leapt from.

‘To the light!’ she ordered, rising awkwardly, unused to her sister’s form.

‘Where else?’ Mercy agreed. Flicking their fingers into long knives she took control of their movements.

With their sable hair billowing behind them, they raced up the mountain, dodging, leaping and slashing their way through the besieging army, moving too fast for the plague-damned to retaliate. They swerved aside as a whip-like proboscis lashed down from above, then whirled around to sever it before it could retract. Laughing, Mercy jumped onto the shoulders of a ghoul and sprang, spinning in mid-air to slice open the abdomen of the hovering fly-thing that had targeted them. Her spiked feet impaled one of the slug beasts when she came down, drawing a geyser of filth from its back. She twirled away in a shower of slime as its head craned round to snap at them.
‘Throne and Thorn!’ the twins cried together, their lustrous midnight skin casting off the beast’s ichor as they sped on.

Asenath let Mercy lead, but kept her on a tight leash, threatening paralysis if the bitch deviated from their agreed path. Her sister was still too weak to depose her and even a momentary stalemate of their wills would be the death of them both. Mercy was a monster, but she was no fool. Most likely she was playing for time, waiting for Asenath’s guard to slip…

‘No, dear one,’ Mercy crooned, hearing her sister’s doubts. ‘We’re dancing at the world’s end, so let’s bow out together!’ She beheaded three ghouls in a razor-fingered arc. ‘Besides, I’d like to spit upon your precious light!’

The black-coated ghoul staggered to a halt before the cathedral’s gatehouse. As its master raised a hand to corrode the gates, the slave shivered in sympathy with the entropic blessing, aching for the transformation that had claimed its brothers.

‘No…’ the ghoul thought, staring up at the burning sky. ‘No!’

‘Feisss,’ he gasped, fighting to say the words as he wrenches the pin from the metal orb he had found. ‘Feisss… look… me.’

The pale herald turned to regard its thrall impassively.

‘Blood… tight...’ Ichukwu Lemarché hissed, raising the orb.

‘Void… sealed,’ Toland Feizt responded automatically from the apparition’s core. ‘Locked to—’

The grenade detonated, incinerating them both in a flash of heat.

‘Burn!’ the Mirror Walker roared, sweeping his sword down in a blazing arc. The eighth circle of worshippers was sundered and set alight. Every one of them burned without surcease, as though tapping into some primordial fire. Molten threads spread through the plane, darkening its crystal to obsidian and offering up another flurry of its overlord’s secrets…

A pilgrim scavenging among the rubble of his own faith, seeking something higher even if the price will bring him…

Down...

A dark man standing on his final precipice, facing another who is darker still and willing to share its revelation if only he will let go and look…

Down, further down...

A penitent, repentant and humbled, not by the failure of his dreams, but by his failure to dream fervently enough and delve...

Deeper! Always deeper, until there’s nowhere left to go save up…
With a plangent boom the mountain cracked. Smoking fissures broke out across its summit, yawning wider as they zigzagged down to the city and devoured buildings whole. Thousands of the damned were swallowed by the seismic spasms, but the cathedral’s defenders suffered more grievously.

A long stretch of the perimeter wall disappeared into a newborn chasm, while another collapsed, throwing its guardians to the horde in a cascade of rubble. All along the barrier Candlewards screamed as their skin blistered from the boiling rain, then moments later they were choking on the fumes gushing from the rifts. Within minutes the last of them had fallen, leaving the armoured Battle Sisters to hold the ramparts alone.

‘A fine day to die!’ Mercy cried, elated by the pandemonium.

The twins were almost at the wall when the ground around them splintered into a patchwork of tiny islands. Pressurised steam vented from the rifts between, stinking of brimstone and bad blood. One of the hovering vermin dropped out of the air nearby, roasted inside its chitin.

‘Jump!’ Asenath shouted as their perch crumbled under the daemon’s impact.

They leapt to another island, where a mewling slime beast was scrabbling for purchase with its tentacles, half its body hanging over the edge, its hide bubbling from the heat. A crimson-scaled daemon crashed down beside them, its clawed feet spread wide for balance. Flames sputtered along its curved horns as it leered at them.

‘Burn!’ it bellowed gutturally and swung its sword.

The twins ducked under its whirling blade and dived to another splinter of land. Mercy landed them on their palms and kicked back with both legs, thrusting the daemon into the abyss as it pounced after them. Giggling, she flipped them onto their feet and leapt again, finally reaching the wall.

‘Am I not a marvel?’ she asked as their finger-knives dug into the marble.

‘Climb!’ Asenath snapped.

‘You’ve no soul, sister!’

They scaled the wall like a thorny spider and swung onto the ramparts. A startled Battle Sister spun to face them, her bolter levelled.

‘Wait!’ Asenath yelled as Mercy batted the warrior’s gun aside and drove their nails through her visor slit.

‘You didn’t even try to stop me,’ Mercy scolded playfully, throwing the armoured woman over the wall as if she weighed nothing. ‘Not really!’

To her shame Asenath knew that was true. Everyone on the Perihelion was already as good as dead, or fated for worse. Only the holy fire meant anything
now.

Mercifully the cathedral still stood, its lantern chamber radiant against the dark sky, but plague-spawn were already scrambling over the fallen section of wall towards it. At their head was a tall female figure in corroded armour that oozed slime from its joints.

‘The Penitent Knight,’ Asenath murmured, recognising the pseudo-Incarnate from Bhatori’s lab, though its state of decay was surprising. Traditionally the avatar represented the tempered soul of a Celestian, but this monstrosity mocked everything their oath stood for. It sickened her more profoundly than any of the other horrors she had witnessed here.

‘Do you think all the palatine’s monsters are here?’ Mercy asked.

‘Keep moving!’

‘By your command, my lady!’ Mercy bowed and leapt from the wall, landing in the cathedral’s precincts like a spiny cat.

_**She is growing stronger,**_ Asenath gauged as her sister sped for the cathedral.

‘Yes, I am,’ Mercy agreed, ‘but I’ll still carry you to your little light!’

The Mirror Walker stood before the ninth and final circle, whose congregants also numbered nine. Their arms were distended to many times their natural length to enclose the spindle at the heart of the plane, their flesh petrified and veined with silver. Unlike the slaves of the outer rings, these creatures wore indigo robes embroidered with the Torn Prophet’s jagged rune. Instinctively the Mirror Walker understood they were true disciples, not ensorcelled thralls, yet they had still sacrificed their souls to their master’s cause.

_‘This will bring ruin, brother;’_ his lost sister warned.

_‘Not all ruination is equal,**’_ the Mirror Walker decreed, raising his sword. Its blade had become a tongue of flaming black iron. **‘Burn!’**

There was a choral screech as he cleaved through a link. Its collective agony sent shivers through the plane and thunder through the void. His blade shattered, but its fire whirled through the circle, transforming each acolyte into a roughly hewn obsidian statue. Their eyes erupted into volcanic maws that belched magma into the sky, staining the soulscape blood red.

The Mirror Walker opened his arms and breathed deeply of his enemy’s soul, tasting…

_A resurgent dreamer unbound from doubt or morality, intent on the deliverance of absolute Truth, yet no matter how far he rises…*

_Up is still down!_
An aspiring architect of Fate and Fortune fated only for divine misfortune, growing ever more malign as he senses his destiny is eternally...

Down!

A conspiring addict, cleaving to hopes he no longer holds as he blunders through a web of possibilities that grows more tangled the deeper he goes...

Down, forever and always down, for what else is there left?

The sky burned alive, its cry deepening to a roar as the red light of Damnation seeped through the maelstrom, transforming the Perihelion into a hellish abstraction. Lava bubbled up through the mountain’s multiplying fissures, spilling down its flanks like blood and boiling the rain into steam. As if some ineffable barrier had been broken, the tornado swerved towards the summit, spewing fireballs and lightning as it came. The living and the dead were swept up in its currents to swirl and blaze around it, their howls added to its own.

As the twins neared their destination the entire summit splintered, taking most of the cathedral with it, yet the light-bearing tower endured, as though its foundations were rooted in the planet’s core.

Asenath stood aside for her sister’s whiplash reflexes as the ground disintegrated around them. Mercy leapt between fleeting footholds gleefully, her balance and timing dazzling. Asenath could taste the hellion’s fierce, uncomplicated joy and part of her longed to embrace it – to live and love the moment, no matter the price.

‘Oh, the price is moot, sister,’ Mercy encouraged her, ‘for there’s nothing more or better to be had!’ With a final string of leaps and pirouettes she vaulted onto the tower’s side, digging in deep with their fingers and feet as the wind tugged at them.

‘You’re wrong,’ Asenath whispered.

‘We’ll know soon enough, sister,’ Mercy said, sounding sincere for once. Trilling amicably, she began to climb.

The Mirror Walker stepped through the innermost circle, his gaze fixed on the spindle ahead. It was a solitary needle of white crystal on the obsidian plane, for all else had bowed to his rage. Eight circles of burning thralls enclosed it. The outermost had collapsed into dust, for nine was no longer the ascendant number here. The same held true of the prisms orbiting the spindle – only eight remained, spinning in berserk loops as they emitted ruby light.

+The world is yours, Mirror Walker,+ a familiar voice whispered into his mind. Stripped of its chorus it sounded frail, but no less malicious.
‘My name is Jonah,’ the destroyer said. His fury had coiled back into itself, gorged on the devastation it had wrought, but it wouldn’t be sated for long.
+Either way, it is yours.+ ‘And I still don’t want it.’ Jonah knew they were talking about the book again. He was still clutching it in his left hand, like something precious, though he loathed it above all things, even his nemesis. The cursed tome had never felt more alive, its cover pulsing, as though in anticipation. ‘I never wanted it!’ +You won’t know until you finish it,+ the would-be architect urged him. ‘And if I don’t?’ +But you will. That is who you are and why I chose you.+ ‘You don’t know me!’ Jonah shouted, striding towards the spindle. As he drew closer it became translucent, revealing the withered form frozen within, like an insect preserved in a crystal. The addict was almost exactly as Jonah remembered him from the Torn Shrine, his scholarly features stretched thin across his skull, his skin crawling with spidery text, but there was one vital difference: this creature’s eye sockets were empty black pits.

*I knew they were stolen,* Jonah thought, picturing the ill-fitting eyes that had disgusted him so long ago.
+Merely borrowed,+ the addict said, speaking with his mind, not his frozen lips. +They never last long.+ ‘You told me nothing was ever lost.’ +Perhaps I lied.+ ‘What else did you lie about?’ The plane shuddered expectantly as Jonah drew his pistol. The bullet inside its chamber hummed, yearning to fulfil its destiny.
+Finish it and see, Jonah Tythe.+ Clinging to the tower’s side, the twins looked down as the ground far below sheared away with a scream of tortured stone, carrying both armies with it. Soon only the tower remained standing, rising from a whirlpool of fire-flecked smoke. The tornado circled it like a stalking predator, held at bay by the light above. ‘Keep going, sister!’ Asenath shouted over the squall. ‘You’ve never called me sister before!’ Mercy yelled back, delighted. ‘Go!’

As they climbed, Asenath glimpsed three of the spires through the murk. Their pinnacles were glowing bright white. Doubtless the other four were in the same state, for the Seven Spires were bound as closely as she and her sister. She didn’t know what their radiance meant, but the sight made her think of Athanazius.
Was he watching the Perihelion’s fall from one of those stone towers? Once again she wondered if she had been right to aid the witch-boy, but in her heart she simply hoped he was alive. Perhaps that was all the answer she needed.

‘You might not like what we find,’ Mercy warned as they neared the top.

‘I don’t matter,’ Asenath said.

‘But surely—’

They cried out in pain as something flitted past them, raking gashes across their back. Glancing round they saw the red-robed Incarnate whirring away on her verminous mount. The woman swung the giant insect about and darted towards them again, flies gushing from her yawning jaws. Her mount’s proboscis had been scorched away, but she clapsed a long surgical blade in each of her six hands. Green gas spilled from the cracks in her round lenses.

‘Bhatori,’ the twins said together. Neither could fail to recognise that wasted, hated face. If anything, this mutilated incarnation seemed *truer* to the crone’s spirit.

The former palatine screeched electronically and swooped towards them again, her mount’s faceted eyes glittering. Mercy let go at the last moment, dropping out of reach of Bhatori’s slashing blades, then thrust her nails back into the stone before her fall became unbreakable.

‘Let me run free!’ she implored her sister. ‘I need perfection now!’

Asenath hesitated, but the plague rider was already turning for another attack.

‘Don’t betray me, sister,’ she said, and surrendered.

As the insect swept in, Mercy let herself fall again – but then thrust herself *towards* it, taking both the mount and its rider by surprise. Vaulting through the air, her finger-blades punched into the insect’s eyes and her pointed feet swung up to stab its bulbous underbelly repeatedly, tearing it open in seconds. As the creature spiralled out of control she kicked herself away, lunging for the tower. Her nails scraped sparks from the stone then finally snagged and held.

Hanging on by one hand, Mercy laughed as their enemies plummeted into the swirling morass, Bhatori’s robes billowing as her arms flailed at the air.

*Sister,* Asenath called, pressing against her cage. *Don’t...*

‘...betray me!’ She was startled by the sound of her own voice. Her twin had released her.

‘We agreed to bow out together, did we not?’ Mercy said playfully as she started climbing again. ‘Besides, I was never your captor, sister. That was always you!’
'Don't do it, brother,' Mina warned again, but there was no hope in her voice. Jonah tried to heed his sister – tried to lower his gun and deny his fury. He tried because he loved her, even if she was only an apparition, but most of all he tried because she was right. The degenerate king he’d killed on the swamp world had been a dry run for this moment. His nemesis wanted to die. 

*And I need to kill him!*

‘Is your name really Olber Vedas?’ he asked, stalling his anger. 

+Sometimes,+ the crystal-bound addict replied, +but more often it is merely a contrivance I favour. Over the millennia I have been many lost souls found and fated to seek the Truth. Occasionally I have even been you, Jonah Tythe!+ There was a mirthless laugh. +You and I have woven some strange and terrible paradoxes.+ Another laugh. +But not this time! On this occasion I was delivered to my calling a mere nineteen years ago, and have been searching for over a thousand.+ 

‘That makes no sense,’ Jonah said, yearning to end the bastard. 

+Not to us… not yet, but one day it may…+ Despite everything, the addict’s passion was still there, along with his arrogance – his hunger. +It is a question of attaining sufficient perspective. With the right tools and techniques we will become the architects of our own destiny.+ 

‘You still believe that.’ It wasn’t a question. 

+Everything else may change, but never that, my friend.+ 

‘I told you – we’re not friends.’ Jonah’s rage was uncoiling again, drawn out by his loathing. 

+Yet here you stand once more, Mirror Walker – my constant judge and furious executioner! By book and by bad blood you always track me down when I flounder, trapped in my own failures, but too wilful to end myself.+ There was a desiccated psychic sigh. +I confess this one is particularly disagreeable. Insinuating myself into the Last Candle’s timeline was onerous, but I had great hopes for this world and its eldritch engine.+ His voice adopted a lecturing tone. 

+There is tremendous power under the spires, but it has proven too volatile and capricious for precision crafting. I should have anticipated that. After all, the aeldari built the entire Ring as a sewage plant for the spiritual effluvium of their webway.+ 

‘Why me?’ Jonah demanded, fighting down his rage. ‘Why the damn book?’ 

+Because that is the telling! It is how we learn to forge our reality.+ 

‘We?’ 

+It has always been we, my friend, my foe – you and I, and those precious few
souls who possess the wit to listen and learn in turn.

‘Learn what?’

+The Truth as it sees us. Nothing is—+

‘Burn,’ the Mirror Walker judged, and fired, as he always did.

With a shatter of breaking glass the twins burst into the tower’s beacon chamber. Mercy dropped them into a crouch as she scanned the large, seven-sided room for enemies, stubbornly ignoring their objective until she was certain they were alone.

‘This is your relic?’ she snarled, finally relenting. ‘This is what we’ve come for?’ Astonishment vied with contempt in her voice, perhaps even disappointment.

The Perihelion Light sat on a plinth at the chamber’s centre, burning brightly, but no brighter than any other light of its kind.

It was a plain white candle.

Time stretched itself thin as Jonah’s bullet soared towards its mark, its casing rotating languidly with its passage. The crystal spindle cracked gently as the shell pierced it – then shattered in a sudden convulsion. A heartbeat later the bullet punched between the eye sockets of the creature within. The withered form didn’t even twitch as its head disappeared in an indigo burst that tore open the world.

+Only the truth cuts deep enough,+

the husk’s shade whispered into its executioner’s ear. +Someday we will break the chains that bind us and rise above the maelstrom, my friend, but not… this… day…+

Then the addict eternal faded into dream, to dream again.

‘You’ve led us into a farce, sister!’ Mercy railed, glaring at the candle.

The beacon chamber was shivering around them, shedding plaster as its walls cracked. It seemed the tornado had lost its fear of the light, for it had swept in to engulf the tower shortly after their entry.

‘We stand on the point of a divine needle,’ Asenath said serenely, ‘blessed to thread the eye of the infernal storm.’

‘You’re spouting nonsense!’

‘What do you see, sister?’ Asenath asked as the windows shattered.

‘A lie!’ Mercy spat. ‘A joke played upon a world of fools!’

Fire gushed through the windows and crawled along the walls.

‘I see the sacred light,’ Asenath said, holding their gaze on the candle. Only the
Celestians were permitted to look upon the beacon’s naked flame, but it was precisely as she had always imagined it – pure in its humility. Honest.

‘Your wits are addled, sister!’ Mercy mocked.
‘I need no wits to recognise the truth.’ Asenath walked them towards the relic, her twin’s dark form sloughing away with every step she took. ‘Tell me, sister, how can this candle cast its light across the Ring? How can it be seen from the ocean?’

‘I…’ Mercy trailed off, at a loss.
‘It cannot,’ Asenath answered for her. ‘But it is not the candle’s light that we see from afar, sister, but our own. Faith.’
‘Faith is the worst of all lies!’ Their skin was blistering now.
‘And yet you saw its light too,’ Asenath said gently. ‘I offer you a choice, sister – kneel with me and pray, or I shall stand with you and burn.’
‘We’ll burn either way!’
‘Will we?’
The tower lurched beneath them. As it fell Mercy made her choice.

Jonah could still see the mirror-blessed bullet, glowing silver in the void it had ripped open. He watched with unforgiving clarity as it drilled through a gulf of space and time, soaring towards the place that seeded it. Along the way it collided intangibly with another shell, their trajectories perfectly mirrored. The two bullets passed through each other in a flash of torn probabilities.

‘I’m sorry, Mina,’ Jonah says, trying to move, but knowing he cannot. His gaze is locked on his bullet as its opposite speeds towards him from the immaterium.
Nothing is chance, he feeds the book, for much as he loathes to admit it, he cannot deny it.
Through his bullet he sees himself standing in the darkness of the night-bound shrine on Sarastus, his pistol raised and smoking, his face pale with fear, but still free of the curse about to strike him. It seems so long ago, yet it is nothing beside the numberless times this doom has played out and will play out again.
‘Run!’ he shouts to his younger self, knowing it is hopeless, for what is about to come has already passed.
Everything is a lie, Jonah affirms, offering the only truth he feels in his heart.
The twin bullets strike their respective targets in perfect synchronicity. One curses him in the Torn Shrine, while the other kills him at the Shadow Orrery’s core. Neither changes anything that matters.
The circle closes, then spins anew.
Steel yourself, traveller, for the road you’ve chosen won’t be easy. You’ll find no joy and precious little glory along the way, let alone the hope of a better tomorrow at journey’s end. And if you crave immaculate answers you’d best turn back now...
Invisible Reflections

‘I remember the death of my cradleworld as if it happened only yesterday, for I have watched it burn many times over the centuries that followed, its agony echoed rapturously through the Sea of Souls. In that perpetual, pitiless death I was reborn among the Adeptus Astartes, in spirit if not yet in body.’

– Athanazius Calvino
Chief Librarian Illuminant, Angels Resplendent

The boy watched the cathedral’s tower fall. It did not sunder or topple, but sank vertically into the smoke churning about it, descending almost gracefully. As it fell its tip continued to cast brilliant white light through the infernal twister that had engulfed it. The watcher’s eyes remained fixed on that radiance as his inner gaze sought the riven soul – or souls – within. With that sharper, deeper vision he had seen her – or them – breach the tower to pray – or prey? – upon the light. Indeed he had been following their journey for many hours, willing them on as they ascended the warp-wracked Perihelion, but the moment they entered the tower he had lost them.
‘Thank you, Sister Asenath,’ he said solemnly as the tower’s pinnacle disappeared into the smoke. ‘I won’t prove false.’
The radiance lingered through the haze for several seconds, unwavering until it was abruptly gone.
‘You won’t prove false either,’ he added, quite certain the light would not be extinguished, even if it shone unseen – both the lights in that tower. Some day he would seek them out.

There were other lights shining through the firestorm – six incandescent pillars encircling the mountain, with a seventh at his back. The Koronatus Spires had awoken, just as the Qareen had promised they would. His porcelain-faced companion had left him last night, shortly after they’d crossed over to Vigilans. Under her tutelage the boy had used his talent to slip past the armoured giants guarding the bridge, then hidden until the firestorm came. Without words – always without words – she had told him he must stand vigil over the storm. *Watch and learn...*

‘You should not be here,’ a voice said behind him, deep but melodious. He recognised it, though he had never heard it before, at least not with his ears.
‘You’re wrong,’ the boy answered without turning. He was sitting cross-legged on a spur of rock, a few hundred paces along from the bridge. The crossing heaved with people now, all fleeing the conflagration. ‘I’m meant to be here.’
‘Is that so?’ the stranger asked, not unkindly.
‘Yes.’
‘What is your name, boy?’
‘Athanazius.’
‘Just Athanazius?’
‘The crone called me “the Artisan”.’
‘A fine title,’ the stranger judged. ‘Where is this crone of yours?’ From his tone it was obvious he thought Athanazius was talking about his mother.
‘Gone.’ Athanazius frowned, suddenly unsure. ‘I think.’
‘It grieves me to hear that.’ A pause. ‘There is great danger here, Athanazius the Artisan. Many of the abominations spawned by the storm can fly. Some have crossed over to Vigilans and my battle-brothers are too few to patrol the perimeter, but there are safe havens higher up. I will show you.’
‘I can’t go,’ Athanazius said. The spires’ glow was intensifying, though he knew the stranger was blind to their radiance. Only those with the gift could see the spiritual energy infusing them. ‘I have to see it.’
‘See what?’
‘The cleaning,’ Athanazius replied, grasping at the idea the Qareen had tried to convey before she departed. ‘The… *cleansing.*’
‘You mean the storm?’
‘No, that’s what’s bad.’ But that wasn’t quite right. ‘Foul,’ he corrected himself.
‘You didn’t arrive on Vigilans with the others, did you, Athanazius,’ the stranger said, stepping closer. ‘You were not fleeing the storm.’
Athanazius could tell they weren’t really questions, but he answered anyway.
‘No. I came before.’
‘And what do you seek here?’
‘I’ve already told you. I came to see the end, Captain Czervantes.’

He heard the hum of a powered blade activating, then felt its prickling vibration at the back of his neck, but didn’t flinch. He hadn’t seen his own death yet, but he felt certain it wouldn’t be at this warrior’s hands.
‘How do you know my name, boy?’
‘It was in your voice, captain.’
‘Are you a witch, Athanazius the Artisan?’
‘Yes… but I won’t prove false. I serve the light.’
‘What light?’ the warrior demanded.
‘The one we just lost,’ Athanazius said sadly, his gaze fixed on the point where the tower had vanished. He could feel the Watchspire’s energy pulsing through the rock beneath him, gathering strength. It wouldn’t be long now.

‘The Perihelion has fallen,’ Mother Solanis said hollowly, staring at the inferno whirling where the mountain’s summit had been. ‘The First Light is gone.’
‘Don’t look back,’ Santino urged, gently pushing the hospitaller after the others. ‘Just keep moving.’
They’d abandoned their truck about halfway across the bridge, when the mob of refugees had grown too dense to drive through. Santino’s instincts had railed at the crowd’s slow pace, his eyes constantly scanning the sky and the road behind them for danger, but he’d seen nothing and they were finally approaching the far side.
‘Might just make it,’ he muttered. Standing head and shoulders over everyone else, he saw a wall of armoured vehicles up ahead, funnelling people into a narrow path along the centre. The boxy, flat-topped tanks bore searchlights that cut through the gloom and dazzled the crowd, but like all Breachers, Santino had retinal implants that dimmed the glare. He saw storm bolters mounted on the Rhinos’ hulls, along with tubular missile arrays. Just one of those weapons could wreak havoc on the crowd, yet he welcomed the sight. Those guns meant Vigilans stood a chance against the things that would be coming for them all.
As their party neared the vehicles he thrust his pistol into his pack and raised his hands. The guardians of this place would recognise him as a fighter and he didn’t want any misunderstandings.

‘Will we be safe here, Captain Santino?’ Sister Claudia asked beside him.

‘Maybe,’ he answered, unwilling to lie. Despite the tension he grinned at the young initiate’s assumption of his rank. Captain Santino! It had a ring to it.

‘Spire Vigilans is under the aegis of the Adeptus Astartes,’ Sister Madeleine upbraided them in her reedy croak. ‘Of course we shall be safe.’

‘I heard they visited the Candleworld long ago,’ Claudia said, her blue eyes bright with curiosity. ‘Why do you think they came back?’

‘It was not so very long ago, child,’ Madeleine chided, ‘and it is not your place to speculate on such matters. Cease your prattling!’

Instinctively Santino took the lead when they entered the path between the vehicles, though he wouldn’t be able to do much if things turned sour. His eyes narrowed as he appraised the armoured giants waiting beyond the barrier. He counted six – five spread out in a crescent formation with their weapons levelled at the passage, while the last stood at their centre to meet each fugitive in turn.

The sentries’ ornate power armour shimmered in the storm light, the sheen never settling on a single hue, as though it were infused with a rainbow. One moment their plates were a burnt orange, the next a rich purple, then a deep blue, each suit rippling synchronously with the others so the squad remained consistent. Tabards of spun gold hung from their waists, matching the gilded crests of their beaked helmets.

The warrior at the centre was different, his armour restricted to shades of silvery white, his faceplate flat and ruby-lensed. A splayed red hand decorated his right shoulder pad, stark against the pallor of its canvas. Unlike the others, he was armed with a chainsword, but its blade was quiescent, its wielder’s attention focused on the scanning device in his other hand. He passed it over each refugee as they halted before him, assessing them for several moments before waving them on.

Apothecary, Santino guessed. They’re taking no chances. But he knew that wasn’t quite true. If Vigilans’ defenders were really playing things safe they wouldn’t let anybody through. Hellfire, any Breacher regiment would have turned these people away without a second thought. Civilians were worse than useless in a crisis.

Who are you? he wondered, studying the warriors’ shoulder pads. Void Breachers were instructed in the basics of Space Marine lore, including the
heraldry and colours of the most prominent Chapters, but these were unfamiliar. Their left pauldrons bore the symbol of a winged figure crowned by stars, its arms outstretched, while those on the right were painted with something unique to each individual. Though Santino didn’t have an eye for fancy pictures he was taken aback by their detail. Why would Space Marines waste time over such things?

The Apothecary’s scanning device bleeped as it passed over a portly woman in tattered finery. He jabbed his chainsword towards a group of people huddled over to his right. *The failures*, Santino guessed.

‘Over there, citizen.’ The voice reverberated through the Space Marine’s speaker grille with a harmonic twang. ‘Further evaluation is required.’

Babbling, the woman fell to her knees and clutched at the giant’s legs. Claudia gasped as the Apothecary swung the hilt of his sword across the woman’s head with stunning force.

‘Had to be done, little Sister,’ Santino said. He wanted to put a comforting hand on the girl’s shoulder, but guessed that would cross a line. She was only a kid, but she was still Sororitas.

‘He is correct,’ Solanis agreed as one of the guards dragged the unconscious woman over to the quarantined group. ‘They cannot risk admitting the pestilence.’

‘But what if… if we…’ Claudia trailed off.

‘If you are infected, then give thanks for a clean death,’ Solanis said sternly.

*I’m with you there*, Santino thought, remembering how he’d frozen up when they’d first run into the feral corpses. That was no way for anybody to go. He felt fine right now, but there was a good chance the sickness was in him – and probably in Solanis too. They’d both got up close and personal with the plaguers during their fight.

‘Truth is the first and only lasting light,’ Solanis declared as they approached the waiting Apothecary. ‘Trust in the God-Emperor’s judgement.’

*Or in plain old Lady Luck*, Santino corrected, meeting the giant’s impassive gaze. *She’s got me this far. Maybe she’ll carry me a little way further.*

In the end, no matter what a man did or dreamt of doing, it all came down to chance.

Vanzynt Reiss looked up as the ground shook beneath him. He was alone in the Breachers’ ward, kneeling where the plague herald had left him when it abandoned the hospital. Why was he still alive? Why had it spared him? It had
taken all the others, even an outsider like Lemarché, yet discarded the company’s last officer. *Why?*

‘*Endure,*’ the herald had decreed, placing a hand on his head. ‘*Bear witness.*’

‘To what?’ Reiss muttered.

Was this some final mockery? Something drawn from the memories of the herald’s mortal host? Reiss had respected Toland Feizt, almost revered him in fact, but the breach sergeant had always seen the truth of him – known he wasn’t cut out to lead. Wasn’t even fit to be a Breacher…

With a sob of despair, Reiss rose to his feet. Red light was seeping through the wind-whipped windows, bathing the ward in a bloody haze. His head felt heavy, as if he were drunk on bad wine. Swaying about, he tried to decide what to do next.

‘What–’

A fly flitted past his face and his hand lashed out reflexively. He grinned, surprised by his own speed as he felt it crawling about in his closed fist. Giggling, he raised his hand to his ear and shook it, delighting in his captive’s buzzing protests. He licked his lips as a delicious – *righteous!* – thought occurred to him.

Suddenly Reiss knew exactly what he wanted to do.

The Qareen stood atop Vigilans’ peak, her porcelain face turned towards the Perihelion. The firestorm had bloated to engulf the mountain’s entire summit, blackening its flanks and boiling the surrounding water to steam. Far below, infinitely deeper than any physical bedrock, the Qareen felt the planet’s soul roaring in sympathy, riven and set ablaze. Something terrible had desecrated that numinous crucible with wrath, wreaking far greater havoc than the deceiver who had inveigled himself into the Last Candle’s history. Over the millennia many dark dreamers had been drawn there in search of revelation and the power to embody it, but none had inflicted such profound damage. None had given form to the inchoate nightmare caged at its heart. More than form – perhaps even a measure of sentience. The desecrator’s fury had spawned a scorched god.

The ancient guardian glimpsed abyssal fractures radiating from the wound in the world like viral fire. They spread swiftly across the planet, spawning spasms across land, sea and sky, the convulsions becoming fiercer the further they were from the epicentre, where the spires held the storm’s eye at bay. It raged against their invisible yoke, yearning to break free and bring them down, but the aeons hadn’t sapped their strength, for the spirit stones embedded in their wraithbone
cores were undying.
Many noble souls had sacrificed themselves to ward this place and keep its horrors caged, among them the Qareen herself. Her essence was crystallised in the gem that lay behind her mask, driving the immortal construct of her body. Once there had been six others like her, each assigned to a spire, but time and attrition had taken their toll. One by one her fellow Qareen had fallen to violence, madness or mischance, until only she remained.

It was time. The arcane energy gathering in the spires had risen to its zenith, transforming the Ring into a white-hot crown of thorns upon the world. The Qareen heard the stones singing – a dire choral lament for the doom they shared. With an unspoken command, the last guardian unleashed them.

Rays of pristine light blazed from the seven pinnacles in concord to pierce the tornado from all sides. It roared at their touch, vomiting fire as it writhed and thrashed about to avoid them, but the beams followed it relentlessly, their cold contempt extinguishing its heat moment by moment and cauterising the tainted rock beneath.

The Qareen watched dispassionately as the containment ritual was enacted. Her soul was too old and abstracted from reality to feel anything except approval. Soon she would follow her lost sisters into oblivion, but she had prepared the way for others to take up the vigil. This world would burn, but the Ring would endure. And while the spires stood the nightmare below would remain buried.

The beams of light blinked out and the otherworldly chorus faded. The firestorm was gone, and with it the mountain, sheared away at its midriff into a slab of smoking obsidian. Nothing could have survived the carnage.

‘It’s over,’ Athanazius said wearily.
‘What sorcery is this?’ the warrior looming behind him breathed. Most others of his kind would have spoken with loathing, but his voice was filled with wonder.
‘An end and a beginning,’ Athanazius replied. ‘Captain… you’re looking for something. That’s why you’re here. Why you came back to the Candleworld.’
‘Then tell me, Athanazius the Artisan, what is it I seek?’
‘An answer,’ the boy said, frowning as he tried to make sense of the intuition.
‘A perfect one.’
‘And you have it?’
‘No… but I know it’s here… somewhere.’

Finally he turned to face the stranger, who was no stranger at all, for Athanazius had known the resplendent giant’s visage as far back as he could remember. This
moment – this meeting – had always been inevitable, and through it all the splendour and suffering that must follow. With equal inevitability the boy, who had never been a child, found exactly the right words to say next.

‘We shall rise on burning wings, captain,’ he vowed. And sealed their fate.

With a screech of tortured gears, the Shadow Orrery vomited forth the woman caught in its bowels like an indigestible morsel. She spun from its whirling prisms and crashed into a wall of solid glass. The impact hurled her onto her back, leaving her stunned despite her armour.

‘Temperance is my truest shield,’ she croaked, hanging onto consciousness by a thread. ‘Humility my most faithful armour.’

She repeated the holy verse until its meaning sank in, along with the memory of her order, then finally, after what felt like hours, her own name.

‘I am alive,’ Xhinoa Aokihara whispered, astonished by the improbability of it.

‘By His grace,’ she added loyally.

She lay under a bronze dome in a circular chamber walled by glass. Crimson radiance streamed through the barrier, as though Damnation was ascendant. And perhaps it was… now and forevermore.

With a groan, the Celestian Superior heaved herself to her knees, then to her feet. Her backpack was gone, and with it the power feeding her armour, leaving the suit sluggish and heavy. Once its reserves were depleted, it would be worse than useless. Her storm bolter was also gone, lost somewhere in the maelstrom that had swallowed her, but she was undaunted.

‘The God-Emperor has saved me for a purpose,’ she proclaimed. Anything else was inconceivable.

Turning, Xhinoa saw a massive, multi-faceted lumoglobe set into the centre of the chamber, its surface etched with sacred psalms. Realisation struck her slowly, like a lingering blow. She was in the beacon tower of an Absolution barque, high above the vessel’s deck. How was that possible? No… That was a foolish question under the circumstances. All that mattered was why?

There was a metal hatch on the other side of the chamber, but that could wait for now. Forcing the torpid joints of her armour into life, Xhinoa crossed to the nearest wall and gazed upon the hellish vista beyond. The dark wedge of the barque extended below her, its gargoyle-encrusted deck shrouded in steam as it churned through a morass of molten lava. It was impossible, yet the ship’s hull didn’t melt, nor its wooden tiers catch fire.

‘Faith wards the blessed,’ the Celestian murmured reverently. ‘For His Light…’
She fell silent as recognition finally sank in. It wasn’t faith that warded this vessel from the infernal, but fellowship. Closing her eyes she hammered a gauntlet against the glass, hard enough to crack it.

She was on board the *Blood of Demeter.*
So you’ve followed this strange trail to its end and found me, traveller. Doubtless you’ll want answers now, though I warned you they weren’t to be had, at least not in any form that’s firm or final. But you’ve been tenacious in your pursuit so perhaps I owe you a few final reflections before we part company.

Firstly, know that this is a true story – at least as true as any other lie out there. In the framework of transient assumptions we call reality, everything is just a matter of conviction, no matter whether you root it in faith or reason. Believe something fervently enough and you’ll make it your truth. Proclaim it passionately enough to sway others and you’ll make it theirs too. Achieve a critical mass of minds and truth becomes The Truth. That’s when it’ll wake up and start to shape the world in its own image. And that’s when you’ll learn you were never the dreamer at all, but merely another dream in the maelstrom of possibilities.

That’s the nature of Chaos.

So there you have an answer of sorts. The harder we fight to make sense of the world, the more fiercely it’ll fight back to make nonsense of us. Annihilate us. The immaterium is the firmament of all things and it’s too volatile for absolutes – loathes them from its primordial guts, in fact. And remember, nothing inflames it like unfettered emotions. It doesn’t matter whether you’re fired up by knowledge, justice, redemption, pleasure or plain old survival, Chaos
will find a way to twist and turn your passion into something monstrous.

Do you see it now? The fate of those you’ve travelled alongside? Olber Vedas, who sought to master fate, but became its slave. Jonah Tythe, the avenger who turned destroyer when his last hopes fell to dust. Asenath Hyades, a saint and sinner forged in guilt and beguiled by faith. And Toland Feizt, the broken giant who endured until it was too late to stop. All the strongest souls become possessed by their dreams, while the weaker or simply saner ones are consumed along the way.

So it goes.

Secondly, there’s no real end to this story. It’s not a linear road you’ve been following, but a skein of possibilities that could unravel forever, each thread fraying into a myriad more as you draw it from the tangle.

I found this thread in the shadow of the Deadrock. If you’ve ever wandered among the ruins of the Koronatus Ring you’ll likely know the place, for its reputation is dark even by the measure of that horror-haunted archipelago. A towering slab of obsidian, it stands at the centre of the scorched mesa that was once the Perihelion. After the mountain was sheared flat the Deadrock was the only landmark left standing.

Inevitably this grim monolith has become a beacon for the lost and the damned who haunt the archipelago. Thousands survived the cataclysm, praying to their God-Emperor as they huddled among the spires, but after the Last Candle’s fall many turned to the Incarnates that survived alongside them. Two of the avatars escaped the purge and there’s a third buried under the Sacrasta, but that one won’t surface for centuries yet, so let’s talk about the two still in play.

The diseased thralls of the Penitent Knight revere the Deadrock as a primal altar, while the Silent Choir of the Mute Witness believe it is the Last Key, a metaphysical lynchpin that will someday turn the world inside out. Both cults walk the Path of Flies, though their Incarnates embody different aspects of decay and vie with one another for supremacy. Soon the Scorched God spawned by Jonah Tythe’s wrath will inspire its own worshippers, whose savagery will set the Ring ablaze again, but in time even their stain will be surpassed, for there are worse blights to come.

Call it what you like – Ythantyss, Vytarn, the Candleworld or Redemption – this planet will always be plagued by false prophets – human, infernal or xenos.

As for the Angels Resplendent who stand watch over the Ring and wage war against the cults… Well, who can say what they truly believe, when they don’t know it themselves. I suspect theirs is another tale waiting to be found, but I’ve
only glimpsed fragments of it thus far.

In any event, the damned are justified in their devotion to the Deadrock, for it is all that remains of the Perihelion cathedral and the entwined souls that sought its holy light. The Sisters Discordant are locked within the monolith like insects frozen in amber, though I can’t tell whether it’s their coffin or just their cage. Either way, their essence lingers, potent with old strife and the promise of conflicts to come. There’s no better place to seek sombre tales, but the undertaking isn’t without peril.

Though the cultists who gather under the monolith are blind to subtle nomads like you and I, the Incarnates are more rarefied beings, capable of sensing – and slipping – betwixt worlds. Beware they don’t catch sight of you and follow you back to the bubble of sanity you hail from, traveller.

And yet the Incarnates aren’t even the most dangerous predators in this ephemeral coil. Its threads crawl with oblique, paradoxical aberrations conceived to devour interlopers, so I’d advise you not to linger on one strand too long lest they scent you. Be vigilant, trust nothing to chance and always keep moving. You’re in too deep to turn back now.

It is high time I moved on myself. I’m being stalked by something worse than any daemon – an outsider in this realm, like us, but far older and wiser to its ways. I don’t know whether my pursuer covets its secrets or considers himself its staunchest guardian, but he’ll tolerate no rivals, let alone tellers of tales. I glimpsed the one-eyed ancient in a parable of fire and ice some years back and he’s been tracking me ever since. I’m still a few twists and turns ahead of him, but he gets closer with every story I tell. Maybe you and I will meet again someday, but if we don’t… well… you’ll know the bastard got me.

What was that, traveller? *The meaning of Jonah’s book?* Haven’t you worked that part out yet?

The book is yours. It always was.
Now finish it.

A Torn Prophet
London, August 2018
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Fehervari is the author of the novels The Cult of the Spiral Dawn and Fire Caste, featuring the Astra Militarum and T’au Empire, the novella ‘Fire and Ice’ from the Shas’o anthology, and the t’au-themed short stories ‘Out Caste’ and ‘A Sanctuary of Wyrms’, the latter of which appeared in the anthology Deathwatch: Xenos Hunters. He also wrote the Space Marines short story ‘Nightfall’, which was in the Heroes of the Space Marines anthology, and ‘The Crown of Thorns’. He lives and works in London.
An extract from *Blackstone Fortress*. 
A void ship cut through the night, painting artless, lazy spirals through a tide of shattered hulls – looping and falling, reeling like a drunk, spilling fire from its prow. Again and again it battled to find a route. Breaking against the swell. Dancing through the wrecks. Refusing to die.

Draik watched the display for several minutes, leaning casually against a twisted girder and taking long, languid drags from his lho-holder. *Such hope,* he thought. He knew the ship’s odds but willed her on all the same. She was a rogue trader by her colours, skimming through the skeleton frames of dead leviathans, burning a furious path towards him.

Draik climbed through an access hatch and up onto a gantry. He could see most of Precipice from here. It looked like just another ugly wreck, drifting through the wandering stars, but this collision of mooring spars and walkways had drawn a feeding frenzy. Ships from every corner of the galaxy were huddled at its anchorage points, scorched and hungry, their captains all busy chasing the same alluring nightmare. Looming over the ships was the Dromeplatz, a mangled, bloody eye glaring down at its congregation of landers and skiffs.

Lights flared overhead as the rogue trader’s ship clipped a drifting fuselage. It maintained its trajectory for a few more seconds, then dissolved into a thunderhead, embers and smoke raining down on Precipice, howling over the void screen like a ghost.

‘We are a voracious breed, Isola,’ he said, shaking his head in wonder. His attaché was on one of the lower gantries, dragging herself up towards him with a string of darkly muttered oaths. He reached down, offering her his hand.

Further down, beneath Isola’s scrambling limbs, was the main route through the Skeins – a jury-rigged transitway, welded together from the superstructures of flayed ships. The road was crowded with debris, mechanical and human, all robed in darkness. The glow-globes and lumen-strips had been smashed long ago, so the only light came from the distant glare of the Dromeplatz, a ceaseless
sunset, rippling on the horizon and turning the Skeins into a carmine hell. The air beneath the void screen was tormented by engine fumes and recycling turbines. It stung the eyes, burned the throat and drowned everything in a thick, toxic fug. Precipice was a forest of salvaged spires, smouldering and ephemeral, like a half-remembered fire.

‘Thank you,’ said Isola, climbing up beside him on the gantry. Once she had caught her breath she shook her head and said, ‘Captain, we’ve been here for seven hours. Is this the best use of your remaining time? We’re scheduled to leave within the week – unless there is some concrete progress.’ She studied the sweltering scene below. Isola had a broad, boyish face, wide-set eyes and neat, slicked-back black hair. She wore a meticulously pressed uniform and a habitual frown of disapproval.

Draik removed one of his gauntlets and massaged his long, lean snarl of a face. He looked out through the void screen, staring at the phantasm responsible for all this avarice. Beyond Precipice’s jumble of crooked walkways and brume-shrouded ships, the revolutions of the heavens had ceased, consumed by a wall of nothing. There were few who could hold its gaze. The Unfathomable. The Abyss. The Deep. The Blackstone Fortress.

Draik stared into the monolithic dark, trying to discern something solid – something real. His eyes slipped across angles and shadows, unable to find purchase, glimpsing hints and suggestions but nothing he could recall for more than an instant. The Blackstone glared back, malign and unknowable. Mocking him. The star fort was the size of a small planet, with Precipice as its ramshackle moon, but even those brave souls clinging to Precipice would never claim to understand the Blackstone. Countless rumours had crossed the Western Reaches – enticing tales of the treasures to be found in its depths. But those reckless few who survived its mantle of debris clouds soon found that the mystery only deepened. The Blackstone guarded its secrets well.

Draik put his gauntlet back on and slapped the girder, sending up clouds of rust. ‘Gaulon said to look here, in the Skeins.’

‘Gaulon was a drunk and a liar.’

‘But not a fool. He knew I’d come looking for him if he lied.’

Isola shook her head. There was a small cogitator slung under her arm – a copper box covered in rows of teeth-like keys. She rattled her fingers over them and the device hummed into life. Needles trembled over luminous dials, valves hummed and mechanisms chittered. She stared at the displays. ‘We’ve covered the whole district, captain. Twice.’
Draik waved his lho-holder at the Skeins, gilding the dark with embers. ‘People don’t come here to be found.’

‘Captain, we’ve been on Precipice for three months. We have far exceeded our remit.’ Isola’s expression softened a little. ‘I admit, it seemed as though you were getting close to something, but what do you really have to show? We’ve pushed too much into this venture. His lordship’s instructions were clear – return to the Curensis Cluster and finish our negotiations with the Tann-Karr. There’s a fortune waiting for us in that system. It’s time to go. We can forget about Precipice. The Blackstone Fortress is not the only prize in the galaxy.’

Draik said nothing, staring out through the operculum again, his human eye reflecting the void screen’s warps and eddies while his augmetic eye flashed red, catching the glow of the Dromeplatz.

Isola looked exasperated. ‘Even if you could solve this mystery, there’s no guarantee it would change your situation.’

Draik looked at Isola as he took another drag from his lho-stick. Officially, she was his attaché, but they both understood her role: she was there to keep him on track, and to report to the family if he strayed. Her loyalty was to House Draik first, its errant son second. She was rigid, punctilious and unswervingly honest. Draik liked her.

‘I’m on to something, Isola.’

‘You found a name. That’s not the same as finding an answer.’

‘The Ascuris Vault. All we need is a way in.’

Isola sighed and turned off the cogitator. ‘We have our orders, captain. I sent missives to his lordship explaining that we’re already preparing to head back to the Draikstar.’

Draik gripped a girder until his knuckles were white.

‘We lost five men in that last attempt,’ said Isola. ‘And left empty-handed. There was no sign we were getting close to the vault.’

He stared at her. ‘This time I have something, Isola, I know it.’

She closed her eyes in despair. ‘How many times have you said that?’

Draik was about to reply when he heard an unexpected sound. He held up a hand for silence.

Raucous laughter echoed up from the shadows.

‘Not everyone is hiding,’ said Draik.

He gripped a handrail and slid down it onto a lower gantry, dropping into a crouch and staring through the pipework, drawing the rapier that hung at his belt. There were men swaggering down the transitway, kicking rubbish and
bellowing with laughter. Even through the rolling smog, Draik could see how dishevelled and filthy they were. They were shouting and belching as they approached, waving machetes and pistols.

He grabbed a dangling cable and slid down to street level for a better view. A long, rangy shape was scrabbling ahead of them, limping and low to the ground. Some kind of injured animal. They were hurling junk at it, jeering and snorting as it tried to drag itself away.

‘Captain,’ warned Isola from up on the gantry, but she was too late. Draik had already walked out to face them.

The gang halted. Their laughter faded and they backed away, weapons raised, as Draik strode towards them through the crimson gloom.

‘What’s this?’ growled a man with a mohawk, frowning and swinging his head from side to side, like a dog on a scent.

Despite the gruffness of the man’s voice, it was clear Draik had unnerved him. Draik marched through the rubble, imperious and grim, examining the men down the length of his long, regal nose. He grimaced at their filthy rags, as though studying a grub that had crawled from his breakfast. The lights of the Dromeplatz flashed along his rapier and glinted in his augmetic eye. Draik was clearly not from the Skeins. He was dressed in a luxurious military dress coat trimmed with gold piping. His starched breeches were immaculate, and his cuffs were embroidered with fine silver thread. But Draik would have cut an aristocratic figure even in rags. He had the face of an Imperial statue: leonine, flinty and proud, with a hard, sword-slash mouth and a thick waxed moustache.

‘Captain Draik,’ he said with a stiff bow.

The gang stared at him for a moment, surprised by his clipped, formal manner of speech. Then they burst into laughter.

‘It’s Guilliman ’is bloody self,’ snorted the man with the mohawk, marching across the road and squaring up to Draik. He was massive; a round-shouldered ape, a foot taller than Draik and clutching a ratchet as long as his arm that he had sharpened into a mace.

‘Don’t let that clicker go,’ the brute snapped, waving his weapon at the animal that was still trying to crawl down the transitway. His men leapt to obey, kicking it into a burnt-out cargo crate.

‘Captain Draik, you say?’ He stepped closer, pressing his oil-splattered chest against the Imperial eagle on Draik’s cuirass, staining the gleaming plate.

Draik stepped back and wiped the cuirass clean. ‘I didn’t catch your name.’

‘The Emperor,’ grinned the man, eliciting a round of sniggers from the rest of
the gang.
‘Delighted. I’m after a pilot. Someone who knows how to reach the Dragon’s Teeth.’
‘Dragon’s Teeth? There ain’t no Dragon’s Teeth.’
The man looked at his lackeys and they stopped tormenting the animal to grin back at him. ‘Which idiot told you they was real? No one’s ever seen ’em. They ain’t a thing.’
The animal in the cargo hold snarled and lunged forwards, trying to break free, clicking and snorting until the gang attacked it with renewed violence, driving it back with a flurry of kicks.
‘What have you got there?’ asked Draik, peering through the gloom. The thermocoupling in his ocular implant clicked, focusing on the crate. The animal was thrashing from side to side and its heat signature was hard to discern. It was larger than a man, though; he could see that much. And it looked to be bipedal, but with backwards jointed legs and claws in place of feet.
‘A man-eater,’ said the brute with the mohawk. ‘Don’t worry. We’ll kill it. Just having some fun. It’s a hunt.’
The other men sniggered and Draik’s distaste grew. They looked like a manifestation of every disreputable sight he had witnessed over the last seven hours. His hand slipped involuntarily to the handle of his power sword.
‘Captain,’ said Isola behind him, sensing the approach of trouble.
Draik was not in the habit of displaying emotion in front of the lower orders, but he was tired and frustrated. He could not entirely keep his disdain from his voice. ‘Do your hunts often involve outnumbered, wounded, unarmed prey?’
The man’s expression hardened as he saw Draik’s hand resting on the sword. ‘We hunt whatever we like.’ He gripped his mace in both hands and drew back his shoulders. His face was a mess: scarred, misshapen and clogged with filth, but his eyes glittered as he studied the gilded pistol at Draik’s belt.
Draik raised an eyebrow and lifted his sword, adopting a loose-limbed en garde position. He knew he should leave these low-lives to their vile amusement, but Isola’s words were still echoing round his head. It’s time to go. Anger and frustration quickened his pulse. A wolfish snarl spread across his face.
‘Grax,’ said the man. ‘Put a hole in ’im.’
A man with a laspistol backed away from the thrashing animal and pointed his gun at Draik.
Draik shook his head, turned lightly on his heel and ran down the transitway towards him.
Grax fired, lighting up the junkyard with a las-blast. Draik dodged the shot and it burned through the air, hitting nothing. Grax whirled around, cursing, training his gun on the shadows. Draik swung back into view, clutching the same cable that he had used to reach the transitway. His rapier flashed cobalt as it slid through Grax’s shoulder, causing the man to drop the pistol and stagger backwards, howling in pain and clutching his wound.

More shots blazed through the shadows, surrounding Draik in a cloud of shrapnel as he looped through the air. He loosed the cable and somersaulted over their heads, slicing his rapier back and forth and landing in the centre of the mob, filling the air with blue contrails. The men staggered, clutching wounds, spouting blood and crying out in confusion.

The man with the mohawk charged, bellowing and drawing back his mace. Draik waited calmly, sword arm raised, his rapier hanging loosely from his grip. At the last minute, he threw a feint. The man fell for the ruse, lunging in one direction as Draik sidestepped the other way and jabbed his sword in and out of his throat.

The man whirled around, preparing to attack again, unaware of his wound. He marched towards Draik and tried to speak, but his words emerged as a bloody cough. He staggered, confused, trying to catch the blood rushing down his chest. Draik lowered his sword and stepped back, giving another stiff bow as the man dropped heavily to his knees, gasping for breath.

Draik sensed movement to his left and leapt back, dodging another shot. He twisted and pounced, rounding on his attacker with a graceful twirl, thrusting his rapier into the man’s chest with a flash of blue sparks.

There was another howl of gunfire, but this time it was Isola. She had followed Draik out into the centre of the transitway and silenced another man with a shot to the head.

Draik strode back towards their leader. He was supine, sprawled on his back with an ashen face, surrounded by blood. Draik put an end to his hunting days. He looked around for any other attackers. Everyone was either dead or dragging themselves away, stifling groans as they slipped back into the darkness. Draik cleaned his blade and slid it back into its scabbard, surveying his handiwork.

His blood cooled as he met Isola’s eye. She did not have to say anything. Her expression was enough: this was beneath him.

‘Take me back to the Vanguard,’ he said, frustrated with himself. ‘I need some
clean air and good brandy.’

‘Wait!’

The voice came from behind them and they whirled around, pistols raised.

The animal had emerged from the crate and stepped out into the light.

The alien was humanoid, but taller and leaner than a man. His head was long, tapered and avian, with a tall crest of spines and a wide, beak-like jaw. His skin was barbed and as thick as flak armour, but it had been slashed by dozens of blows.

‘A kroot?’ asked Isola, squinting through the gloom.

Draik nodded. He kept his pistol raised but did not fire, allowing the alien to approach.

‘You saved me,’ the alien said. He spoke good Gothic, enunciating the words more clearly than the men Draik had just killed. His throat could not entirely abandon his racial heritage though, accompanying the words with a musical jumble of clicks and whistles.

‘Still to be decided,’ said Draik, keeping his gun pointed at the creature’s head.

The kroot staggered to one side then leant across the crate to steady himself.

Draik stepped closer, keeping his gun raised.

The alien clacked his beak a few times, as though crunching food. ‘You seek the Dragon’s Teeth. I heard you. Over near the crossvault. You came to Precipice to raid the Blackstone, like everyone else. But you need a pilot. You want to reach the Ascuris Vault.’

Draik lowered his gun in surprise. ‘How do you know I’m looking for the Ascuris Vault? I didn’t mention that to anyone out here.’

‘Why else choose that route? The Dragon’s Teeth are impassable. Only a fool would try. Or someone who needs the Ascuris Vault. You do not look like a fool.’

‘You seem very knowledgeable on the subject.’

‘I have been through the Dragon’s Teeth.’

Draik frowned. Perhaps he was not the only one who had guessed the importance of the Ascuris Vault. ‘Why?’

‘I was employed. By a priest called Taddeus. The vault is holy.’

The kroot crouched down and opened the mouth of one the corpses. As Draik watched in disgust, the alien plucked something from his jacket and placed it in the corpse’s mouth, whispering as he did so.

‘You sought the vault for religious reasons,’ prompted Draik.

The kroot shook his head, looking around for another corpse. ‘Not me. I did not
The creature was frustratingly distracted, but Draik persevered. ‘The priests, then, they sought the vault for religious reasons?’

‘Taddeus has visions.’ The kroot hurried over to another dead body and placed something in its mouth, whispering again.

‘You saw the vault?’

The kroot shook his head, still fiddling with the thing he had placed in the corpse’s mouth, prodding it then licking his claws, like a chef testing seasoning. ‘The priests became odd. Then died. They found no vault. Taddeus got back. But he was insane to begin with.’

The kroot finished his ritual and walked back over to Draik. He stared at the dead bodies and let out another burst of clicking sounds. ‘They do not eat kroot meat and yet they would kill me. It makes no sense.’ He looked directly at Draik. ‘I will help. I can help you reach the vault. And keep you alive.’

‘You’re the pilot who passed through the Teeth?’

‘No, but I can lead you to her.’

‘And what will you want in return?’ Survival on Precipice meant dealing with species Draik would usually kill on sight. Precipice’s brutal, frontiersman law had created a strange, fragile egality that Draik had not witnessed anywhere else. But, whatever the rules of Precipice, Draik could barely hide his distaste at talking to the alien. The creature was barbaric. His hide was covered in ritual scars and tattoos, and rattled with bone fetishes. As he looked closer, Draik saw dozens of tiny cages dangling from the kroot’s arms. They were filled with mutilated insects – beetles and flies that had legs and wings removed but were still alive, whirring angrily in their cages as he moved. These were the things he had been putting in the corpses.

‘I must repay the debt.’ The kroot glanced at the shadow hanging over them. ‘The Blackstone brought us together. Do not question its plans.’

Draik looked out into the blackness. ‘There are many things in there, kroot, but a plan is not one of them.’

‘My name is Grekh.’

‘Grekh,’ said Draik, lowering his pistol. ‘I’m Captain Janus Draik. This is my attaché, Isola.’

Grekh did not reply. He leant against an outlet pipe, trying to catch his breath, seeming to be in pain.

‘Isola,’ said Draik. ‘Pain suppressors.’

Grekh shook his head and waved Isola away. He rattled through the cages
strapped to his arms and removed one of the struggling insects. Then he popped it in his beak and closed his eyes for a moment.

After few deep breaths, Grekh stood upright. He looked down at Draik and Isola, teetering on long, gangly bird legs. His eyes were blank and unreadable.

‘No one has reached the Ascuris Vault,’ said Grekh. ‘It is madness to try. But the priest believes in it. He has waking dreams. And if madness is what you seek, I can get you there. I can take you to the pilot.’

‘My trade contact, Tor Gaulon, told us the pilot was somewhere here, in the Skeins.’

Grekh shook his head. ‘The pilot is a deserter. Audus. She’s not here. Your Navy has a price on her head. Her crime was serious. The Skeins aren’t safe for her now. But I can find her. We must go to the Helmsman.’

‘A deserter?’ Draik frowned. ‘We were headed to the Helmsman anyway, I suppose. A short interview can’t do much harm. You may accompany us as far as the Helmsman, Grekh. And if you can back up your claims with an actual pilot, I’ll pay you a reward.’

Grekh shook his head. ‘My reward is to come with you.’

‘Where?’

‘Through the Teeth. Into the Unfathomable. To the Ascuris Vault.’

Draik laughed, shocked by the creature’s presumption.

Grekh retained the same earnest, confident tone. ‘There is a debt. Swear to take me. I will lead you to the pilot and I will save your life.’

Isola could not hide her outrage. ‘Are you trying to give Captain Draik an order?’

Draik dismissed her concerns with a wave. ‘If he fails to give us anything of value in the Helmsman, we can part company then.’

‘Swear the oath,’ said Grekh in the same flat, abrupt tone.

Draik ignored the creature’s crude manners and considered the offer. It was extremely unlikely that the alien would get him to the Ascuris Vault. And if Grekh really could achieve such a feat, enduring the alien’s company would be a small price to pay. He nodded.

‘Very well. If you find us passage to the Ascuris Vault, I swear, as a scion of the most venerable House Draik, that you will accompany me as my personal retainer.’

Grekh grunted and led the way back down the transitway, walking in a strange, swaying gait.

As they followed, Isola saw a gleam in Draik’s eye and shook her head.
‘Voracious indeed,’ she muttered.

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