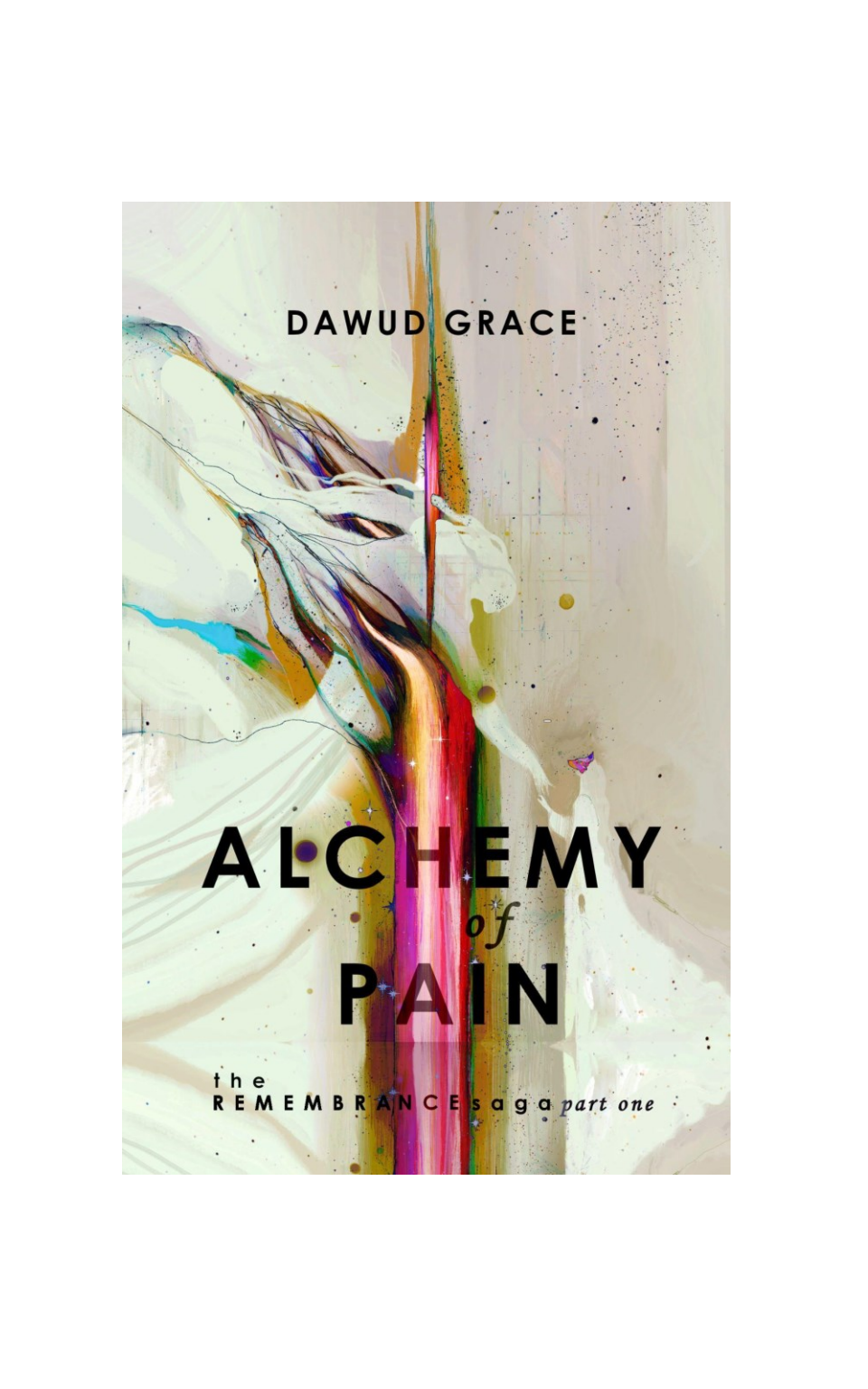




DAWUD GRACE

ALCHEMY
of
PAIN

the
REMEMBRANCES *a part one*

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Alchemy *of* Pain

*The Remembrance Saga,
Part One*

Dawud Grace

Preface

Personal log, Matereus Clawback

The Assembly have made me chronicler — hah, me of all people.

I know nothing, save that I am not worthy of this task. Before the Victory, I was naught but a jester — still AM a jester — whose stage was the beer-soaked table tops of grog-dens, or broken boxes in the avenues of the space station, telling tales to the mindless multitudes drunk on the old religion.

Even worse? I told the lore of the Mal Vellians, those cursed demons. But still, I knew some of the great ones during the days of tribulation, and they would show me mercy even as I spread propaganda, showering me with healing light, though I knew it not.

It appears that some remembered my name and face, and that I spun a good yarn. And so here I am, chronicler of the 1st Theorian temple, new Guardia.

And that I will remain, telling THE tale of the ages, until I either fall back into old ways, or death takes me.

Signed, Matereus

0

Sundered Covenant

It doesn't take long to erase history. It took only three generations to make a whole new civilisation in place of the world the Brethren Mal Vellian swept away – a new world almost completely ignorant of who we once were.

Imagine how stupid I was then, some ten generations after the Catastrophe. I once punched a man in the face who told me that trees were the healers of the planet. Little did I know he could have ripped the spirit from my body there and then.

Thankfully, those who did remember the old world remembered not just the miracles or the guilds or the beauty of the spirit realm. They preserved the Way – the code that gave them both mastery and power, and yet the deepest humility, and – I'm very grateful to say – the patience to withstand foolishness from people that forgot. People like me.

Just as the trees sustain the world, the Custodians sustain the Universe. Only if wisdom fails does a master fail in their duty, so I'm told. And if wisdom fails, only brief in the span of ages does it need to be to bring about the end of all things, as we surely learned.

Materius, Appendix (A)

“And, what do *you* know?!” Arlione snapped. She threw the holopad onto the desk, where the message remained open, floating in the air.

She leaned back in her chair and gazed through the spherical glass of the Temple observatory. The evening sky was overcast, with every star hidden behind smothering clouds.

Arlione rubbed her forehead – tapped the arm of her chair – straightened her embroidered lapels – picked up the holopad, and began dictating her reply.

"Dear Ephaney."

She paused.

"Though, I hold you in high esteem, my patience is wearing thin."

Arlione neatened the perfect stack of papers on her table.

"Haldrian and I were elected to the posts of Chair and Vice Chair by the entire Assembly. This was because the Assembly trusts us to lead the Theoria and our people into the Golden Age."

She stood, and walked to the glass of the dome to look down upon the holy kayo tree and the white stone of the Inner Sanctum far below.

"And, although you may have words enough to act as an entire Theorian council, you are only one person."

Arlione breathed in deeply through her nose – saw small groups of people in the courtyard.

"The Guild of Brokers are an asset! There is no more hunger in the villages. No more injustice in trade, with digital records of weights and measures for every transaction. No more illiteracy among the nomads. No more waiting to communicate with loved ones over great distances. There is no more shortages of cloth ..."

The Vice Chair then sighed. She considered the fact that Ephaney's work as weaver was no longer necessary, due to the machine innovations of the Brokers.

"... or waiting upon weavers to prepare the cloth. Yes, some roles have been made less important, but any Theorian has skill enough to apply themselves to any other sacred duty. We are trained to do this. It is time that you considered doing this yourself, instead of using your frustration to hinder progress in the Assembly – and fill my message box with endless nagging."

Arlione twisted a fabric plait that hung down from her headscarf—the plait that Ephaney herself had woven—a symbol of an apprentice’s climb to mastery of the spirit.

“I love you Ephaney – you were my Mentor – some two hundred plus years ago. But, only two remain of the old generation, and only one insists on causing injury to those she supposedly views as family.”

She leaned on the gleaming handrail.

“You would do well to take a leaf from Grinloe’s book. If anyone has the right to protest, it would be him. But he knows that any sacrifice we make is for the good of the Theoria – of the people we serve.”

The people in the Inner Sanctum were running now.

“Our guilt can often shape how we see the world. If you must speak of betrayal, I must insist you search your own heart before laying blame upon the faithful. The next time may be the last that you have the freedom to do so as a Custodian of the Theoria.”

Arlione frowned. The holopad display began to fade and flicker red. “Now?! Really?!” She spoke the litany, summoning just enough spirit light to boost the power cell. Subtle wisps of blue light rippled outwards from her fingertips into the tablet. “Will they never fix this issue?”

Something flashed above. She raised her face to see the clouds blooming with a cold light. Arlione gasped as the skyship burst through the grey canopy.

“What is this ... ?”

Machinery beneath the craft's fuselage began to glow.

“No!!!!” Arlione leapt. The observatory was consumed by flame and churning heat. The sensations morphed to pain and a swirling, grey blur. Finally, everything vanished.



Ephaney

The stone stairs seemed to pulse as Ephaney climbed – the faltering heartbeat of a dying temple; a dying city.

“M’lady!” her young apprentice cried, as Ephaney fell against the white stone wall. “Let us find safety! There is only pain waiting for you at the top of these stairs.”

Ephaney’s breath caught, her arm and shoulder throbbing from the fall. She straightened as best an old woman could. “Pain is nothing to shy away from, Astar. Only from foolishness must we flee. I must know this is the end.”

She continued, one slow step after the next. And thus was every pathway to salvation taken, she thought. So too, every march into oblivion.

A wall of noise hit them as they stumbled onto the viewing level of the Temple. Ephaney cried out in tandem with the wailing horns, her tears already flowing. Devastation met them there, not only in the fallen masonry – in the burning branches of the holy tree – but in the contaminated sky that strobed with the flash of unnatural power. The frenzied rhythm of skyship weaponry rang out everywhere, while explosions shook the foundations of the city, with every standing stone and living spirit trapped within that cursed drumbeat.

“M’lady, please!” Astar begged, holding her mentor’s sleeve. “I cannot take it!”

“Your lessons, my dear girl.” Ephaney replied, holding Astar close, breathing deeply through her own grief. She looked down upon the great Kayo tree of the temple, with its enormous branches growing into the walls and chambers of the Inner Sanctum. Its healing light had not been seen for a generation, but against the ruins

of the courtyard it seemed more beautiful than ever — more important than ever. The perfect symbol of the Order Theoria, she thought: beautiful, yes—but without light? A lifeless beacon in the dark.

Beyond the Temple gatehouse, she watched a Broker skyship scatter blazing munitions into the Residential Ward — into offices — into houses.

Ephaney gasped in frustration, rocking as she held Astar. “So, this is the ‘great’ good you promised us!?” she called. “The true price of the ‘golden age’!?”

The Guild of Brokers had introduced technology to the Order Theoria, yes, and had helped fix the problems born of a growing population. But the cost? The cost was faith—the cost was reliance on the miracles of Destiny, and the power of the Light — until all but a few could see the ancient ways were being lost, and the warners became nothing more than cranks and crackpots in the eyes of the Assembly.

Ephaney’s mind wandered through the archive of subtle insults thrown her way; of the mocking she endured in the gatherings of governance.

“Perhaps Ephaney’s poetry will solve the issue of poverty in the mountain villages.”

“If Ephaney would simply pray for an answer to the crop shortages, surely we would be saved!”

“Perhaps she thinks that transport ships are inferior to donkeys?”

They would not be mocking now.

Ephaney unwound the silken, computer-made scarf she had accepted from a Guildsman of the Brokers. The fine garment fluttered in the wind.

There was an enormous crash somewhere within the temple. Hot air and dust vented through the building,

billowing out of the arched windows around the pair, sweeping the scarf out into the Inner Sanctum.

Ephaney coughed—blinked—watched the scarf descend. Below, she saw panicked men and women entering the courtyard.

“The Custodians!” Astar said, pulling away to peer over the edge. “They are gathering! Let us leave this place, m’lady!”

Ephaney nodded, made to turn, but stopped. “I have one more need.” Reaching into the folds of her robes, she pulled out a tablet of dull metal. As she held it, a three-dimensional display of a digital workspace appeared: messages; Assembly agenda; personal organiser. A unanimous vote had guaranteed the production of the tablets—had legislated their place in the pockets of every high-ranking Theorian. All they’d really done was replace the Sayers and their telepathic gifts—had made every member of the Assembly lazy, justifying with words like ‘efficiency’ and ‘convenience’.

She held the device out—whispered the litany of power. “Evinin yushira...”

From her outstretched hand, lines of ethereal light began to appear, flowing like the rippling mane of a unicorn. Using the gift of her spirit, she held the tablet aloft with strands of auric energy—the signature of her spirit essence in the world.

“I should have done this a long time ago,” she said, as she began to squeeze on the instrument. The display flickered. It cracked and crackled, until—at the very limit of its structural integrity—something changed upon the display: a pulse of red, staining momentarily the digital icons and holographic cosmos-like background. Ephaney frowned, not because of what she saw on the tablet, but because of what she felt.

From the deepest, most primordial level of her being, she felt a darkness, as distinguishable as the physical darkness she saw with her eyes.

Astar backed away, muttering, her hands covering her ears.

Then came the screams; the harsh whispers; the moans of terror. Yes, some came from the city, even from the Temple itself—but the rest? Were they even real? What forbidden art was this?

Ephaney heard Astar's scream. She tried to turn, to no effect. Her body was not her own to control. Now, she was gliding towards the ledge of the viewing walkway, helpless, her limbs frozen in place. Even her outstretched arm and suspended tablet remained fixed as the balustrade and precipice drew nearer.

A terrible gurgling sound came from behind Ephaney. Then, black tendrils of shadow slithered into view; writhing their way along her arm; wrapping around and drinking in the light of her aura.

Ephaney's clouded mind searched the ancient lore. This was no simple coup—this was defilement of such magnitude, it could mean only one thing:

"The Covenant has been broken," she strained to say. "The Vellian Realm has been summoned!"

"Yeeeeeeessss," an insidious, hate-filled voice replied from behind her.

Ephaney felt herself falling, too overwhelmed by the thoughts—by the shadow being and its attack—to summon light to herself; to slow the onrushing flagstones. All became black.

* * *

Grinloe

"What do you want from me?!" Old Grinloe's words echoed through the decaying garden. He knew the eyeless maiden saw him — heard him — though, she said nothing in return.

A wind swept through the drystone arches, disturbing Grinloe's robes and thick grey beard. "Why do you appear tonight as the dweller of some ancient tomb? Only yesterday you were of flesh and blood. What kind of dreams are these, where things of beauty slowly pass away, and torment the dreamer, as *you* do?"

The withered woman's empty eye sockets fixed Grinloe to the spot. "All things pass away. Will your shame not die, too?"

The old man put his face in his hands. "I've earned my shame!" he cried. "So, let me join you!"

"Let bad things die, Custodian, and good things live."

Grinloe wiped his eyes, and approached the plinth upon which the maiden stood. "Don't speak in riddles. Will you not just sing, like you did when you first appeared?"

Smoke began to creep from the maiden's eye sockets. "The time for song has passed. Now is the time of sorrow." Her cracking jaw then opened wide. She screamed the sound of blasting horns.

Grinloe coughed and spluttered. He groaned, realising that he was now awake. "Another strange dream..." he muttered.

He wriggled further down into the nest of cushions, resigning to the warmth. *Just a little longer.*

He choked again, and grunted in frustration. In the air he now smelled — tasted — the bitter stench of smoke.

"Hmph. You'll burn the whole Temple down one day, old boy," he rebuked himself.

Reluctantly, he sat up, eyes still closed. He imagined the voices of the goading apprentices: "*It was his own fault,*" he mocked, "*sleeping with the incense burning.*" Peeling both eyes open now, he saw only grey. "Oh—where are the lights?"

He craned his neck—noticed the sounds coming from the city. Upon hearing that noise, the dream—the maiden's words—returned instantly to him.

"The time of sorrow...? The horns of the Temple Guard!"

The corridor outside the reading room was drowned in darkness. Deep, resonant notes thrummed in the air—warned of trouble. Grinloe moved cautiously beyond the door and paused. He felt concussions in the ground—saw the sickly glowlamps overhead spasming in time with distant booms. As he padded forward, craning ear towards the window arches, something rode the air. Something hidden in the horns—hidden in the thunderous rhythms. *That noise*, he thought, *it sounds like... it can't be.* He had never heard a scream in all his life. How many voices would have to shriek in time to make *that noise*? "It can't be..." He didn't even hear his own breathless words against the appalling din. All he knew, right then, was that he must reach the Inner Sanctum.

He strode now—felt the broken mortar under foot—saw the details of the corridor, washed in a strobing corpse light. His fingers brushed the nearest wall. The feelings were the same—cool stone; now smooth; now carved—but something of its essence was no more. He thought of all his peers who had, so long ago, left the mortal world. He thought of how they were when living—when they laughed; when they wept—and how they were when lying lifeless, their spirits departed. He

snatched his hand from the wall. "Let good things live..." he muttered, "and bad things die."

Now, he ran.

"Argh!!!" The old man fell back against the wall, his eyes manic. Through the gaping archway, he did not see a reaching arm of shadow, but the garden cloaked in black. No more sweet aroma. No more ever-blooming flowers. Only black.

He breathed a single breath, and then, his entire world was bleached a blinding white. He did not see the explosion, but heard it—felt it—felt his world collapsing all around him.

Grinloe awoke to high-pitched ringing. He peeled his face off of the floor and blinked through the hazy image now burned into his eyes. A pool of red lay stark against the grey blanket of dust that covered everything. He slumped back on his knees, squinting down the corridor. In the flickering bioluminescence, he could make out mounds with jutting spars—ancient beams from the high ceiling, now buried in ruined edifice and pillar.

The Custodian tried to stand, wheezing. He slumped back down—pressed himself against the wall. He recalled the words of power in his mind—considered saying them—but let the sacred litany fall away. He scoffed. "Is tonight not good enough?" he asked himself. "Is a threat against your life not a reason to use your gifts once more?" He shook his head—saw the maiden in his mind's eyes.

"Will your shame not die?!"

"No," he decided. So long as Grinloe serves Grinloe it is he who must die. Huh?!"

He snapped his head to the corridor—watched the darkness. Were his eyes so damaged as to make movement where there was none? He cocked his head.

Were his ears now cursed by violence to make whispers in place of his own voice?

“Who goes there?!” he cried, or thought he cried.

The ringing pitch began to ebb and shift into the sound of grinding metal. Cold laughter now echoed down the corridor, mixed with many screaming voices — not those of the city, but near at hand.

“I am Grinloe — Custodian! Help me, Wayfarer!”

The voices stopped in unison. Now the horns phased back to Grinloe’s hearing, as did the distant thud of weapons. All light seemed to flee completely.

Something brushed Grinloe’s cheek. He shrieked and pushed against the paving stones, shuffling sideways. He couldn’t stop the shallow breaths — the shaking.

“Griiiinloooooee...”

Grinloe closed his eyes — fought to bring his mind to peace. Teaching apprentices was easy, in the safety of the Inner Sanctum, or reflection gardens basking in summer sunlight. Recalling lessons now felt like the hardest thing he’d ever done. Slowly, the Crucibles came: Fear, anger, acceptance, patience, gratitude, destiny.

His long, outward breath seemed to despell some of the panic, but not the evil voices. “All things must pass away,” he whispered — clenched his fist. “But no Custodian could ever die fleeing from their duty.” Grinloe drew in the dusty air. He would flee no more. “Evinin Yushira...”

A gentle wind passed through the passage. The shadows seemed to quiver — to withdraw — as light began to form above the old man’s head. He felt a tear roll down his cheek, and finally looked to see the halo form. Waves of indigo lapped cyclonically up from Grinloe’s heart —

passed down his outstretched arms—danced like windswept gossamer of light.

A new, melodic voice called to him in song.

He turned his face to see the maiden standing in the corridor, living—radiance itself. She sang even as black limbs of shadow passed through her spectral body, then tore her into pieces.

Grinloe gasped as the vision vanished. He commanded the auric waves to lift him to his feet. Upright once again, his eyes blazed with light, but still his sight could not breach the distant shadows of the corridor. He raised an arm, fixing the glowlamps in his mind and vision.

“Imliyo Evinun!” With his words, lines of energy leapt from his fingers—pushed through the air and shadows to the glowlamps. Each reluctantly spluttered into life, throwing sickly light upon the devastated corridor. In the distance, Grinloe saw a man.

The grinding metal was a sword—excaliban—a weapon of the Temple Guard elite. The sharp edge shrieked against the stone floor as the soldier dragged it at his side. Living smoke engulfed the figure as he walked—strove against the touch of light.

“You are in the wrong place, watchman!” Grinloe called.

The soldier said nothing in reply. Instead, he raised his weaponless hand. Writhing shadow dashed forward from it—forced itself upon the spirit light blooming in the corridor—engulfed a glowlamp as he passed beneath. It exploded—raining sparks—bringing back the soldier’s shroud of darkness.

Grinloe indicated to the shadow that engulfed the soldier. “No longer are the songs recalled that warn of the Vellian powers. But, I remember the time before. I know what you are.”

The man twisted his raised hand. Several huge timbers began to shake within the piles of rubble. They rose up—floated through the air—and stopped beside the walking soldier, suspended. “The time for song is passed,” his tortured voice replied. “Now is the time for deeds.” The watchman himself now drifted into the air. He floated over a large pile of wreckage—beams still at his side—touched down; continued walking.

“The time of sorrow,” Grinloe muttered. He watched the enormous beams hovering beside the soldier. “Evil are the deeds of which you speak!”

Baring his blackened teeth, the soldier raised the excaliban blade. It was stained with the deepest red. He screamed demonic laughter, then flung his arm out at Grinloe. The beams smashed down the corridor—each a giant battering ram—toppled wall and pillar as they flew.

Gasping, Grinloe pulled the light strands down upon the timbers. They shattered into deadly shards and fragments, scattering violently all around the Custodian. He panted, steadying himself. “This is no petty spell, or trick of your machines! You have drawn blood in the hallowed place!” He pointed at the tainted excalibur. “Blood of the Custodians! The Covenant is broken!”

The voices cried out in laughter. “No, Theorian! Only our chains have been broken!”

Grinloe pointed to the vassal body, moving ever closer. “Did the men you bewitched know the cost of their betrayal?! Did *that* man?!”

The face of the soldier suddenly changed. It morphed from impossible malice, to a grimace laced with the rawest conceivable terror and pain.

“HEEEEELLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLP!!!”

The face went blank—then smiled once more. “Power always comes with a price.” The watchman then

took his sword in both hands. Sparks rained down upon him as the next glowlamp exploded overhead.

"Krestal," Grinloe began, opening his right hand. "Ikrid di yurdi iri voltarum!" Light began to swirl around his fist, slowly forming into the shape of a blade. When the krestal edge was forged, he ran the length before his face, watching the focussed energy flow in weapon form. "I must free your slave from this contract of lies, and hope his spirit finds its way."

"His spirit is *OURS!!!*" the soldier screamed. He sprinted at Grinloe, brushing piles of rubble aside with limbs of smoke, excalibur raised high.

Grinloe leaned against the force that came before the watchman: a wall of invisible power. He planted his feet firmly, and swung the krestal blade up to meet blood soaked steel. The impact of the blades threw dust and rubble flying. Shadows snatched and reached from all directions, but could not penetrate the field of light that held them.

The soldier forced the krestal back—swung down again.

Grinloe parried—felt the enemy's face colliding with his shoulder. In the same motion, the man's free hand was suddenly on Grinloe's throat.

Through choking breaths the Custodian swung the krestal up to block another single handed strike—then pulled his own glowing blade across the arm that held him.

The watchman snatched his hand away, the black field around it sizzling.

In an instant, the krestal morphed into a ball of light. Grinloe's blazing fist struck the soldier's chest.

He slid backwards on firm feet, churning up the dust as he went. The man skidded to a stop—screamed—stoked the shadows into raging vines that grasped at

rubble all around him. The pieces rose in a broken wall of bone crushing ammunition.

The fragments flew at Grinloe. In a breath, his auric light was back in krestal form. He swung, again and again, cleft down several blocks and sections of carved cornice. Then, came a massive, broken pillar – the counter strike knocked the old Custodian off balance. Even as he fell, he swung once more, obliterating a chamber door that flew at him. Grinloe hit the floor, raised his face to fragments raining down upon his auric field. He held the burning krestal out before him.

The watchman carved through the dust – airborne, sword point down – descending.

Grinloe heaved, and raised a fist as if to strike an uppercut.

The flagstones – the very ground in front of him – tore up and flew into the air, snatching up the watchman, mid-attack. An entire section of the corridor disappeared through a gaping hole in the collapsed ceiling – landed distantly, somewhere on the second storey.

Coughing – dribbling blood – Grinloe let the auric waves lift him once again. His eyes narrowed on the hole, as shrieks reached him from above. He willed his spirit into steps of light that formed in front of him, and climbed.

He alighted on solid ground, and peered through billowing smoke and ruin. Ahead, a great branch of the kayo tree bisected the corridor, growing through the walls into the great library. Propped up against it, he saw the soldier sitting, head lolled forward, wreathed by shadow. Grinloe raised his palm – summoned energy to his hand to eviscerate the enemy. The power came to him, swirling in a steady motion – the air itself seemed to quake. Then, he saw it – gasped – lowered his hand. Amid the pluming

shadow that swarmed the unconscious soldier – within a pool of congealed nothingness swirling above his head – a man-like shape of light reached for Grinloe, clawing desperately against the frothing binds that pulled it back into the void, again, and again.

Grinloe stepped forward, the ball of energy dissipating. He bolstered his light field as lingering smoke came to life and reached for him – as the nearby shadows tried to bind his aura. “Come to me, my child!” the Custodian cried, reaching forward with his hand. Strands of aura wove into a chord – pressed through the wall of malice – almost touched the tortured spirit of the soldier.

The watchman’s hand shot upwards. He caught Grinloe’s spirit light in his tainted grip.

Grinloe struggled against the soldier – found himself edging forward, dragged by his own spirit – with the sound and stench of bubbling flesh assaulting his senses. He looked again to see the soldier’s spirit falling back within the void – the void then sealing shut. The Custodian watched the scenery change, as if observing from a distance: corridor, ceiling, leaves, and finally, the dark sky flashing ceaselessly above. He felt leaves beneath his right hand – felt the smooth texture of the kayo’s bark. He knew then he’d been thrown from the Temple – was now lying in the Inner Sanctum, thirty fathoms high. He felt warm liquid beneath the hand on his stomach, and began to whisper verse:

*“Should blood be ever spilled,
or sacred root upturned,
in Sanctum, darkness filled,
will Vellian return.”*

A loud *crack* shattered the moment. And another. And another.

Grinloe sat up to see the soldier hacking limbs from the great branch as he walked towards him, laughing through black liquid that poured from his nose.

The watchman stopped in front of Grinloe— watched him with a hate-filled smile. “The Vellian will receive you well, Theorian,” he rasped, raising the excalibur.

A glimmer in the air above the soldier caught Grinloe’s eye. “Not before you, my child,” he breathed. The old man lowered his head, and did not see the blade as it fell.

* * *

Arlione

Arlione felt hot wind disturb her headscarf — heard traces of a voice; a whisper in the darkness.

Vice Chair.

Arlione stirred. “It was just a dream,” she muttered.

“Vice Chair!” the whisper became a cry.

“It was just a dream!” she shouted back. Arlione then felt herself being shaken by her robes.

“My lady, wake up!!!”

Opening her eyes, she saw the blood covered face of a young man — saw his uniform — a soldier of the Sanctum Watch.

“Thank the Great Destiny!” he cried. “We need you, Custodian! We need everybody!” The young man stood, picked up his excalibur that leant against the wall. Beside him was the portal to the Observatory stairwell. It was full to the ceiling with rubble.

"What... What's happening?" asked Arlione. "I was at my desk and...." she remembered diving towards the stairs—remembered the searing flame that fell upon the Observatory.

"Betrayal!" the soldier choked on the word. "The Broker skyships... Even watchmen of the Temple... And something far, far worse! You must come now, my lady!"

Arlione saw the soldier's left hand as he extended it to help her stand. It was grey, and shrivelled.

She gasped, and recoiled.

The young man closed his afflicted hand. "They tried to get me to join them in their treachery. I would not turn with them upon the light, not now, not ever! But, the shadow has poisoned me. It is spreading."

"The shadow?" Arlione felt her stomach turn. "It can't be..." She looked to the watchman's earnest face, and saw there no trace of madness or confusion. She cleared her throat. "The Assembly will speak of you with pride, soldier."

The man grimaced—bowed his head—his voice quivering as he spoke. "If any are left to speak at all."

Arlione laughed, feebly. "You clearly do not know the full power of the light, my son. Here, stand close to me."

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply as the young man approached. "Evyarim..." she whispered, "itront upiru ovra maydu." Immediately, petal shaped fibres of light began to form around Arlione's arm and hand. It flowed from her to the watchman's injuries. She opened her eyes.

"Thank you, Vice Chair." The man flexed his hand. It was still grey, but no longer shrivelled and necrotic.

"Meet me at the Sanctum," Arlione breathed. "It is best we do not go together. They will be hunting me."

The soldier bowed his head again, and took his sword hilt in both hands. "It has been an honour, my lady."

Arlione saluted solemnly to the soldier. She watched him turn and run to the nearest stairwell. When she was sure he had gone, she fell against the wall, clasping her heart. Ephaney's words came to her, unbidden.

I sense betrayal in these reforms. I sense a shadow building. Your pride – Haldrian's pride – will not let you see it. Leave this path, my daughter, before it is too late.

The Vice Chair tried to catch her breath. Straightening, she stumbled to the nearest archway.

"It is not your fault! It's not your..." She drew a halting breath, stepping out onto the viewing walkway.

Beyond the balustrade, Arlione beheld the carnage of the Inner Sanctum. The holy tree burned in several places. Walls lay spilled upon the torn flagstones. Fires blazed. Worst of all? The horns – the bone chilling screams – that filled the night air.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

The noise broke Arlione's malaise. She looked down, over the edge. On the lowest branch of the kayo, she saw a figure lying on his back – a Custodian, no doubt. Traces of indigo light flickered around the robed man as he now sat up.

"Grinloe?! Is that you?!"

She saw then movement further along the branch. An inferno of pitch black flames approached the old Theorian.

At the core of the gathered darkness, Arlione recognised a sentry of the Sanctum Watch. The possessed man raised his excalibur skyward.

“Grinloe!!!”

She dived over the edge. Her brilliant auric field bloomed— scattered streaming embers, leaves, and smoke as she fell towards the watchman. Arlione screamed the litany of power and struck.

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Grinloe

Grinloe felt an impact. His chest, the branch, the air about him throbbed in a singular event of power. But, he wasn't dead. He did, in fact, feel suddenly very alive. He raised his eyes to see the watchman standing over him, frozen, a glowing line of purple down the entire length of his body. The shadows seemed to take the shape of multiple deformed figures, clasp at the soldier. Or maybe holding up? The effort was in vain.

The watchman slowly split in two. Bubbling innards sloshed down onto the branch as the halves fell apart, and down.

The shadow beings—the writhing Valyarim entities—gathered form, and made a final reach for Grinloe. Straining limbs almost touched the old man's chest, before being dragged into a swirling halo of black above the mass of shapes. The portal dissipated with a deafening shriek.

"Grinloe?!" a voice called. "Are you ok?!"

Through the smoke and embers, Grinloe saw a figure standing with burning Krestal in her hand, her fine robes torn to ribbons. The Vice Chair of the Assembly now strode towards him.

"The Covenant has been broken," he muttered as she reached his side.

"I know." Arlione knelt.

"The age of the Theoria is over."

"Do not say such things!" Arlione snapped.

Grinloe leaned back and stared up at the flashing clouds. "The people have chosen darkness. *We* have chosen darkness."

"You are wounded! Did the being touch you?!"

"...Darkness over light. Self over sacrifice."

“Grinloe, let me heal you!!!”

His eyes fell to Arlione, then. “Heal me? No. You have done enough ‘healing’, Arlione. It is time to let the Great Destiny take our place as healer – as teacher.”

Arlione fell back on her haunches, staring vacantly ahead. After some time, she suddenly gasped, and pointed to Grinloe’s abdomen. “Grinloe, look!”

Bright indigo lines of light were weaving along the Kayo branch, working their way to the bleeding wound in Grinloe’s stomach.

“The tree is healing you!” Arlione reached to touch the spirit energy flowing from the tree. It recoiled from her hand.

Grinloe smiled, staring at the great tree overhead. “I am not worthy of your touch. I should have done more. Should have said more. Like Ephaney. Perhaps the two of us could have altered the path they led us down.”

“I hear you now, Grinloe!” Arlione said. “Come with me to the Sanctum! Ephaney will be there. We will make things right! I promise!”

“I do not need your help, Vice Chair.” Grinloe watched the Kayo’s aura – the planet’s aura – swirl around his fingers. “Help those who you can. While you still can.”

Grinloe watched Arlione stand. She moved her red eyes from Grinloe to the tree, bowed her head to both, then turned and ran into the Temple.

* * *

Haldrian

Twisted metal rained upon the city.

“Your skyships will not save you!!!” Haldrian screamed, watching the obliterated craft fall into the streets below. His robes billowed in the churning storm of auric power around him—around the surviving Custodians at his back.

“Chair Haldrian,” a woman in green cried, “the pieces! They are...”

The Theorians watched the burning fragments decimate entire buildings as they hit the neighbourhoods below.

The Chair grit his teeth—drew air deeply through his nose. “We have no choice!” He turned to face the group of Custodians and loyal sentries gathered behind him.

“If we do not fight, it will not only be the city that perishes. It will be the Theoria, and with our death will come the end of all things!”

“Forgive me, Chair Haldrian,” a kneeling watchman began, “but the innocents?”

“Innocents?” Haldrian repeated, slowly. He scanned the sullen faces of the group. “Tell me, is it possible that all those people should have been ignorant of this day?” He pointed out across the gorge that separated Temple and city. “Did not a single person under our care have the conscience to bring word to the Assembly?”

Distant screams and explosions spoke in place of any reply.

“No,” Haldrian snorted. “They did not.”

The watchman stood abruptly. “Look!”

Hadrian turned to face the city. Past the bridge of Eschevar—past the gatehouse and the shattered gates—swirling gouts of black smoke poured in among the stone buildings. What little light the glow-lamposts gave out was absorbed as the streets were consumed completely.

Shouts and screams came clearly from within the depths of the shadows.

Suddenly, clawing through the plumes came people—soldiers and Theorians, illuminated by their spirit light—assailed from every quarter. Living smoke tore through glowing defences—snatched up men and women, dragged them back into the darkness, or hurled them into wall and floor.

“RUN!!!!” cried an onlooking Custodian.

“FALLBACK!!!” screamed the soldiers of the Sanctum.

Haldrian summoned all his auric power. The brilliant waves of indigo became like a lightning storm all about him. He heard somebody thank him, but did not move a muscle.

“Will we not go to them, my liege?!” one asked.

“We must help them!” called another.

Two Theorians stepped forward to cross the bridge, hit a field of light and stumbled backwards.

Raising his hands, Chair Haldrian spoke with fearful power. “Hold your ground! Our duty is to the Sanctum—to the Kayo! Make strong the defences of the Temple!”

Through the auric field that Haldrian now held over much of the group, they watched the survivors fall, one after the next. The final defender made his last stand at the bridge—was overcome—and thrown screaming into the gorge.

“What is our purpose if not to act?”

“We could have stopped this...”

“MAKE STRONG THE DEFENCES!” the Chair bellowed over the murmuring. Gradually, he felt the auric contribution of several others to the defensive field.

“Nooooooooo!”

The Chair spun on his heels—stepped towards the voice he knew so well.

“Arlione!”

Turning back, he addressed the foremost of his peers, and pointed to the boundary of the Inner Sanctum. “Do not let anything cross this threshold. Not machine. Not shadow. Not flesh.”

The ranking Custodian frowned, nodded his head once, and turned his back on the Chair.

Haldrian ran in the direction of the Kayo. Behind him, he heard the call of his peers—heard the terrible thrum of ordinance hitting their defences—heard retaliatory blasts of auric power.

* * *

Arlione

“What have they done?!” Arlione fell to her knees. She dared not lay a hand on Ephaney, lest she cause more harm to her former Mentor’s ruined body. Through the red-saturated robes she saw twisted limbs.

Arlione closed her eyes—searched the unseen for Ephaney’s spirit light—called it forth, and waited.

Gradually, the faintest traces of the old Custodian’s light began to flow from Ephaney’s heart.

“Praise the Great Destiny,” Arlione breathed. “Can you hear me?”

Ephaney’s partially open eyes stared vacantly into the sky.

Arlione choked back tears. “You were right. Do you hear?! Come back! Even if it’s only so you can hear me say I’m sorry. Come back! Tell me you forgive me!”

Gasping – raising her hands – Arlione willed healing light, and focussed on the wounds of Ephaney.

"Vice Chair!!!"

Arlione started – looked to see Haldrian striding over burning root and mound. She smiled through the pain. "Look! Here he is! Chair of the Assembly, come to help you! We will do it together!"

Haldrian's footsteps slowed as he reached the pair.

"Haldrian! Help me to..."

"It is too late for her," the Chair interrupted, looking down upon his Vice.

Arlione stared searchingly into Haldrian's burning white eyes. "Do you not see her spirit?! She is alive!"

"All light is needed for defence."

"With you and I both, it will only take a minute to..."

"We do not have a minute. Not for you, not for me..." looking now at Ephaney, the Chair snorted, "... and certainly not for traitors like this one."

More explosions shook the ground. Cheers went up from the defenders of the Inner Sanctum.

"Haldrian," implored Arlione, "how can you say this?!"

"This woman could have helped save us from the evil of this day. But instead, she chose to make enemies of us; ever questioning – ever arguing – ever crippling conversation in the Assembly. When in fifteen years did she ever come to us in person?"

Arlione swallowed.

"All she ever did was cause confusion – sow the seeds of corruption. She was a chosen messenger of doom. She is one of them..."

"Haldrian..."

"...she was one of them."

“You are wrong.”

“Leave her side at once, Vice Chair.”

The distant voices in the Sanctum now called out in terror and alarm.

Arlione’s tears rolled down her cheeks. She laughed. “You call me Vice Chair? In this hour? Will you not just speak to me as your wife? Or will I never again see the husband to whom I made my vows?”

Haldrian’s eyes softened. He reached out to Arlione.

She smiled, and then frowned, as she began to rise involuntarily.

The Chair lifted and placed Arlione on her feet, then released his auric grip on her spirit. “You will see your husband when our enemy is overcome.”

She saw pain in his eyes. She saw anger. And something else. Shame?

Tall Haldrian broke eye contact. He turned, and began to run towards the defenders at the gorge.

Arlione looked after him, and saw swarming shadows at the bridge of Eschever—shadows and their vassal bodies pushing at the boundary of the Sanctum.

“Ephaney, I will return to you...” Arlione’s eyes widened as she looked back to her former Mentor.

Deep blue lines of auric light rolled over the flagstones, and lapped softly across Ephaney’s body. Arlione followed the flow, and saw again the Kayo tree at work to restore life to a fallen protector.

“A day of dread, and yet a day of miracles, too. I leave you in purer care than that of my own.”

Arlione made for the sounds of battle.

The argument was already underway when she reached the threshold. She saw a peer in charred robes waving his hands in the air. “I’m telling you, Haldrian, it is doing no good!”

Haldrian stared at the stooped Theorian, his neck craning forward. "You mean to tell me we should do nothing?!"

The desperate Custodian pointed to the bridge. "Every skyship we bring down, the shadow grows. Look!" At the threshold of the Sanctum, a wall of shadow forms ripped at the field of light. Possessed men and women skulked among the demonic army.

Haldrian indicated to the Sentries posted at the threshold—at the mound of bodies that lay beyond the field.

"These beasts cannot breach this defence, but their ordinance can. There will be nothing left to defend if it continues!"

"Stones can be replaced. The lives of innocents cannot. Indiscriminate death is not our Way."

Scoffing—snarling—the Chair drew himself up. "I will deal with the threat myself, then." He began to laugh. "Though, it would cost you less to aid me willingly."

The robed man stepped back from Haldrian as his own auric light began rushing from his body, gathering around the Chair.

"Haldrian!" Arlione cried, stepping forward. "You make a mockery of the Crucibles! The most basic lessons! Your gifts will leave you—argh!" She dipped to a knee, as her spirit essence began to pour to the Chair of the Assembly.

Turning to face the city, Haldrian raised his arms. "You will not take the Golden Age from us! From me!"

The enormous cyclone of energy tore up flagstones—toppled pillars—scattered burning heaps. The defensive field began to waver.

Though some servants of the shadow fell from the bridge, some spilled through the gaps in the light. They

were cut down by burning excaliban steel – but came on endlessly.

“Haldrian!!!” Arlione cried, trying unsuccessfully to stand. “Your pride will only help the enemy –” she could not stop herself from sobbing. “ –and destroy the ones you love.” She raised her face to find her husband, only to see him stagger backwards. The storm of power about him collapsed inwards – an energetic whirlpool siphoned to the shrinking halo above his head.

“Nooooo!” Haldrian screamed, reaching out to try and stop his gifts from withdrawing – from resisting him and his commands. Helpless, he watched as every single glowing fibre disappeared back within the halo, until the halo stuttered, then vanished with a flash. He fell to his knees, silent – lightless – abandoned by his own spirit.

Boom.

An invisible pulse disturbed the auric field about the Sanctum.

Boom.

Again, the combined power of the Theorians shook. Arlione stood – squinted past the melee to the distant gatehouse.

Boom.

She gasped.

Beyond the shattered gates, a huge figure approached. The thunderous footsteps hammered the air, as the being stepped onto the bridge. It stopped and stared.

Through the darkness, Arlione made out a body hanging in the centre of the shadow creature—a vacant faced woman. Her light hair waved wildly amid the twines of evil power erupting all around her—the same essence that bound her arms and legs.

“Orator Torsha,” Arlione muttered. “So this was your prize? To be stripped of all you are... all you were.”

The others began to panic—to step backwards—and falter in their defence.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Reality shook, as the creature ran. Two enormous wings of frothing smoke unfurled, while the suspended woman let out a crushing scream of pain and evil intent.

The defensive field failed.

* * *

Ephaney

*“What comes of bad I cannot say,
amid the dark we all must face,
but sure as breath we all do take,
a silver lining lights the grey.”*

“Come, then,” a friendly voice said in response, “tell me of this silver lining.”

The blurred shape in Ephaney’s vision gradually took form. She smiled. “Hello, Grinloe, old friend.”

The haggard Custodian smiled back at her. “Well met, Wayfarer.” He waved his hand through the veins of blue light now slowly withdrawing back to the Kayo. “It

seems that you and I both found an unexpected ally this evening."

Ephaney sighed. "It has been a long time since I have felt much companionship in this place."

Grinloe lowered his head. "I am truly sorry for that. I should have done more to aid you in your campaign against the Brokers."

"Don't dwell on it," she replied. "I am just glad to see that you have found your gifts again." Ephaney watched Grinloe's aura emanating from him. "It's been fifty years or more, no?"

"Fifty three," he replied, his head still bowed.

Ephaney recalled the vote that disbanded the Sayers for networks of machines.

"Pride," Grinloe muttered. "I told them if I was not needed as a messenger, then I would not be needed by the Assembly in any form. Foolishness. I broke the Crucible of forgiveness. I was not worthy of the light."

"You were never unworthy, friend," consoled Ephaney. "No spirit ever serves the undeserving."

Wayward strands of their spirits intertwined as if in separate, unspoken conversation.

"What's done is done," she went on, "you may not have served the Assembly, but many generation of apprentice you have helped since you resigned." Ephaney suddenly gasped. "Astar!" She tried to sit up – cried out – slumped down onto an elbow.

Supporting her, Grinloe brought her head back to a makeshift pillow. "Rest, Custodian. Her spirit soars in the Evin Dirum now."

Straining to her left, Ephaney saw a heavy robe laid on the floor nearby. A small, withered hand lay visible on the flagstones. She breathed out deeply.

Suddenly, the air began to thrum and shudder with power.

Ephaney coughed. "They are not satisfied with creeping in their secret gatherings," she said, "with feeding on their puppets."

Grinloe looked to the entrance of the Inner Sanctum. He grimaced and returned his gaze to Ephaney. "They want to bring the entire Vellian into this realm, then."

"And from here," she replied, frowning, "assail the Realm of Light."

"We must do something!" Grinloe rubbed his forehead—jolted at the sound of an explosion. "And soon!"

Ephaney closed her eyes—began to hum. "I believe sacrifices must be made. Do you remember the lay of the Veil?"

Grinloe went still. "A tale of a barrier between light, dark and the physical. A means of resetting the balance between good and evil."

"Yes."

"The shadow will be cast out, but so too will the light."

"Only hidden, except for those truly worthy of its presence." She watched the Kayo's spirit linger at the base of the huge trunk. "When the Theoria learn again the meaning of the Way—only then will we have a chance against this evil."

After a moment, Grinloe sighed, and smiled. "You have been guided in your instincts. I will trust your judgement in this, Custodian."

"Thank you, friend. We will need time. We will need helpers. Use your special gift, Grinloe, if only for the last time."

He nodded. "I will send a message to the remaining of the elders." Grinloe looked to the threshold again.

"And then see if we can bring our leader back from the Abyss. After all, I am no match for what approaches."

Ephaney held out her hand, which Grinloe took.
"Ever the Evin Dirum."

"Ever the light."

* * *

Haldrian

Though the sounds of battle raged on every side, Haldrian heard nothing. The explosive combat scattered limbs and liquid all about him. He flinched, as some heavy object almost struck his face, and again as a body almost landed on his lap.

Do I know these people? He asked himself. What is this substance upon my hands? From where does the shadow come, when there is so little light to cast such potent darkness?

He watched a woman crawling towards him, reaching—shouting.

Haldrian.

The voice in his mind was calm, kindly—firm.

"I know you," he replied. "Grinloe?"

On your feet, Custodian, the voice replied. Your people need you.

"My people?" He looked out across the gorge of Eschever, and saw a huge creature striding across the bridge.

Yes! The light was never a tool to wield for entertainment; or to show as proof of our accomplishments. We are servants of the light. Servants of the people. Servants of our friends and family.

Haldrian's eyes fell upon the woman—she was on her back, using failing auric light to resist a sword tip pressing down upon her chest.

"I am nothing," he said, looking at his hands.

Yes. The voice replied. *And only thus can you be truly worthy of the gifts you hold.*

In his hand, Haldrian saw flecks of indigo begin to grow from thin air.

"I am nothing," he repeated. "Only by the reflected light of others does my life carry meaning." The light began to grow outwards.

It is too late for us. The voice paused. *But not for the Theoria. Do your duty, Wayfarer!*

Haldrian's robes began to flutter as if caught in a brewing storm. He was on his feet, now, arm outstretched.

An auric plait reached out and caught the blackened steel that pressed down on Arlione. She cried out, as Haldrian used his renewed gifts to lift the blade into the air.

The female sentry tried to resist, but every chord of evil shadow was rebuffed by Haldrian's spirit. She turned her corpselike stare upon him—screamed, even as her head went flying into the air. Haldrian's krestal edge burned a searing white in his right hand, and then vanished. He approached and fell onto a knee beside his

wife, dashing the black excalibur away—staring at the bubbling wound in Arlione's chest.

"Forgive me," he whispered, looking into her glassy eyes.

She said nothing, but smiled, coughed, and laid her lifeless head upon his hand.

Haldrian felt two-fold drumming in his chest—his breaking heart, and something else.

The bridge before him swung under foot of something huge. A boiling mess of black clouds skidded to a halt as it breached the threshold. A floating woman stared at Haldrian from its core, opened her mouth and wheezed in fragments of wayward light and embers.

"I bring to you your golden age," the woman screeched.

"Orator Torsha..." Haldrian replied, lowering the krestal. It all made sense now: the vote to ban the use of Theorian gifts in Assembly gatherings; a motion to build 'transport fleets' for manufacturing; the easing of restrictions on the entertainment hubs; Torsha's inappropriate remarks in private—her gentle touches to bid farewell or show her gratitude. All these things, and more, to blind with the lie of 'progress'—to swap the rituals of spirit, with those of trade and commerce and mindless activity—to dull the senses to the building evil. "You and your Guild..." Haldrian rubbed his forehead—the sudden pain caused his eyes to twitch.

"You had the chance to join us," Torsha went on, "but even as we saved your dying empire, you were still too proud to be seen with non-Theorians. If you'd have only met with me a single time, of all the times I asked, all this could have been yours." She stretched her arms out wide, with the huge demonic shape around her mirroring the action. "It still can be yours."

Haldrian felt some inner gravity pull his mind to a single statement—a single deed. He lowered Arlione's head. "All I need to say is I submit?"

Torsha grinned. "That is all."

He looked again at Arlione's dirt covered face. "All I need to do is continue living on my knees?"

The Possessed Orator frowned—began stepping forward. "Is it not easier to kneel than stand?"

Haldrian swayed at Arlione's side, when another voice came clear and bright within his mind.

*"In dire need, when shadow creeps,
when link between the realms to keep,
would harm much greater than to cleave,
we sacrifice our gifts for peace."*

Haldrian looked over his shoulder. The Kayo tree was glowing. Auric light was flowing from the ground itself, responding to the words and will of the speaker, all flowing to a single point. "Ephaney?!"

Torsha screamed. Her head snapped back as the huge demon that enveloped her dashed forward—pulled a massive axe from the inky halo above its head—swung at Haldrian.

His Krestal blade burst into his hand. With a blast of dust and air he blocked the strike—was thrown sideways from the impact—jammed the crackling blade in the ground to grind to a halt.

The beast was past him, making for the auric convergence.

Haldrian flung his arm forward. Spurs of light lashed around the valyar's billowing leg.

It stumbled—pulled against the burning lasso—turned, and pulverised the binds with a thunderous strike.

Even as the beast's axe fell, Haldrian was already flying at the creature. He swung once—was met by the body of a sacrificial soldier. He swung again—was met by another. Through red-black mist the axe came down. It thudded into Haldrian's shield of light—breached the barrier—stopped a fingertip from his robed shoulder. The Theorian, strained—roared—struck at the creature's massive arm, severing its frothing hand and axe. He raised his arm to drive the blade home—felt binds stop his sword arm mid thrust. Looking round, he saw several guildsmen of the Brokers surrounding him, each radiating pitch black energy—each contributing their power to restrain him. He looked back to see the giant's arm regenerate—to see it reach into the halo, and pull another axe from the realm of shadow.

“

“Very well!” Torsha cried over the din. “We will feed you to the Vellian first!”

Haldrian braced himself, then watched in confusion as the creature returned to Arlione.

It stopped before his wife—stooped over her body—and began to rise as if drawing in a huge breath. Streaks of indigo began to flutter from Arlione, and fall into the black halo that now opened wide to drink in the spirit light.

Haldrian gasped—felt his stomach drop. Spirit only inhabited a living vessel. “No...” he muttered, realising only now she was alive.

A humanoid shape of pure energy emerged from Arlione. It clawed at its physical body as it was ripped towards the gaping void.

“NOOO!” Summoning all his power, Haldrian tore against the binds. He felt an unfamiliar energy wash over him—poured the extra strength to his sword arm—saw

the limb of shadow burst. The Krestal became a projectile—flew at the first guildsman, who exploded into fragments. It was back in his hand, cutting through the remaining dark chords. The second traitor ran at him—formed a smoking shield to cover his body. Haldrian willed brilliant blue light from the very ground. It fell in a wave upon the attacker—turned his infected body into a bubbling, wet heap. The last guildsman fell to a survivor of the Sanctum.

Haldrian turned his face to see Arlione's spirit clinging on by mere threads—and the axe falling at the failing tether.

He didn't think—he just flew. An impact. Tingling. Numbness. Screams. And then a voice, not spoken, but felt within him.

*We pray that destiny bequeaths,
the remedy that illness needs,
for ailments, struck without a heed.
The Way we find again to heal.*

As vision failed Haldrian, he saw a glowing pillar explode upwards beyond the Temple, beyond the sky. Now, a spirit kissed his forehead. Now, the darkness was complete.

** ** *

Grinloe

"Argh!"

Grinloe slumped back, breathing heavily.

"I can do no more." The old man looked down at Ephaney. Her eyes were closed, but her mouth moved with words of prayer. He looked up and saw that he was

at the centre of an infinite pillar of light. All about him various hues of auric energy poured from the ground, flowed up and joined the stream.

He wiped the pouring sweat from his brow. "I reached all the elders that I could, in every continent." He squeezed Ephaney's hand. "They have heard us. They have turned their will to our purpose."

A blastwave washed over them. Grinloe looked across the courtyard—past giant roots and burning mounds—to the battleground of the threshold. He saw the huge demon staggering backwards, as a bright ball of energy rose up from the ground before it— shot past towards the pillar—joined the upwards torrent. The ground began to shake.

"Haldrian..." Grinloe whispered, smiling— then frowning.

The demon and the human ragdoll at its core was now moving straight for them.

"It's now or never, Custodian!" Grinloe cried. Many possessed followers had joined the valyar being—were racing across the courtyard.

Ephaney no longer moved—no longer seemed to even breathe.

The auras rising from the ground bent and warped around Torsha and the valyar giant. They lumbered to a stop, standing over the Theorian's—smoldering beneath the pressure of the spirit storm about them.

Grinloe raised his shaking hand. "Torsha! No!"

The snarling beast reared up—raised the axe of blazing smoke.

Ephaney cried out as the weapon fell. There was a brilliant flash—the creature stumbled backwards, the axe dissolving into nothing.

When Grinloe opened his eyes, he saw a bright figure standing over them, like the sun itself had taken human shape and now stood guard.

The evil host all shrieked and screamed at the sight of the spirit, now fully manifest. Their leader shrunk backwards, pointed to the Kayo, shouting unintelligible commands. Possessed soldiers and dignitaries began tearing and hacking up nearby roots, spilling up the gemstone footings beneath the flagstones, while Torsha and the valyar demon made for the Kayo's trunk—tore through the flowing aura—then through bark and wood.

Grinloe watched the spirit sentry.

The creature watched him back.

Goodbye, old friend.

His eyes widened, as the being joined the streaming aura and was swept up into the heavens. Before he could process what was happening, it began.

He saw another flash—then a blanket of intense energy spreading outward from the pillar. A thunderous chord of power seemed to shake every single particle in existence. Every spec of sky then glowed a multitude of hues. The auric net then fell.

All enemies scattered. Some clawed at the ground, or tried to bury themselves beneath roots—in the exposed foundations of the Temple.

Torsha stared at Grinloe, her eyes bleeding, and then crumpled under the Veil of light, as it smothered everything. All trace of darkness was eviscerated for an instant. And then, all was still.

* * *
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Torsha

Torsha's eyes throbbed as her heart squeezed blood through the burst capillaries within them. She felt the warm liquid dribble down her cheeks—a pleasant sensation, slowly fading as her memory returned.

She looked down at her hands. No Vellian being swarmed her fingers—held her in its warm embrace—reassured her of the path she trod.

"Onu d'rida," she whispered. "Utrudnaa, utrudnaa, utrudnaa!"

Nothing. Only distant shouting reached her.

A cold sensation churned in her stomach, climbing its way to her head and face. It was not so much a chill, as it was emotion—a long forgotten feeling now spreading through every fibre of her body. She began to shake—drew breath—then screamed. She screamed until no more sound would come—until her body shook with silent effort, but still the shame seemed to pour relentlessly through her veins.

"You have no more power, Orator," a hoarse voice said.

Torsha started, looked up, and saw close-by an old man. He sat hunched beside a bloodstained body.

She gasped—fell backwards—scuttled away from Grinloe the Custodian.

"Don't hurt me!" she cried, bumping against a huge chunk of fallen masonry. "I was forced!"

Grinloe's grey eyes watched her—said all of a thousand wordless reprimands and curses. The most obvious curse of all? Pity.

Torsha looked around the Sanctum. By the bridge, she saw Theorians kneel at sword point—some falling under fist or pommel. A snicker forced itself from her throat—a single, spiteful puff of air. She looked at Grinloe.

Then her laughter oozed out. Then hacked and spasmed. She stood.

"You fools," Torsha spat. She walked the ten fathom distance between them. "You say I have no more powers?" Torsha punched Grinloe in the mouth.

The Custodian fell back—landed heavily—did not move.

"What is *that* if not power?!" The Orator cried. She circled, watching Grinloe cautiously. She flinched when the Custodian finally stirred. As he feebly pushed himself off the flagstones, Torsha approached and pulled back his head by a handful of matted grey hair. "You are the one with no more power, Theorian!" she hissed. "You have sacrificed the only thing that ever gave you strength!"

Grinloe chuckled, his voice wracked with mucus. "You played the part of someone with wisdom so well."

The Orator snorted. "You as well, Grinloe." She pressed the blade against his throat. "Not at all wise to mock the one who holds your pathetic life in her hands."

"Wisdom is to come to terms with our own weaknesses. Strength and true authority is given as a consequence. This is why you will always be a fool—and weak."

Torsha snarled—shrieked—pulled the dagger up and across Grinloe's face, again and again. She threw the blade aside and began tearing at the leaking gashes, cursing, crying.

The old man did not resist.

Finally, spent and shaking, Torsha felt the cold return, smothering her burning rage.

"I am going to kill you," she said flatly, letting go of Grinloe's hair.

Grinloe flopped forward, leaking profusely, coughing up red strands of spittle. "If that were true," he rasped, "you would have done so by now."

“Archon!” a voice called out.

Torsha pulled her burning eyes away from Grinloe to see two pale faced soldiers dragging a groaning woman across the Sanctum. They stopped, and threw down the limp body of Arlione.

“She lives,” one said, blinking through streaming eyes, his face twisted as if battling some grievous pain.

“She can fix it,” the other stammered. “Make her fix it, Archon!”

Torsha’s eyes moved between the two Theorian prisoners. “Yes. They *will* fix what they have done.” She walked to the place where Arlione lay. “Even if it takes a hundred years!”

The first soldier choked back tears. “Archon, what do we do?! We’ve given everything! They’ve made it all for nothi—”

“Silence!!!” Torsha shrieked. “Or is your faith only as true as your loyalty to *them*?!”

The two men cowered.

“Adherents will be rewarded, always” she went on, her voice shaking, “while the faithless shall be destroyed.” Torsha stamped on Arlione’s head.

The Custodian let out a weak cry, then moaned as Torsha wiped her boot on her robes.

“Pain will be all the Theoria will know until they have undone this curse. Then, I will feed their spirits to the Vellian! Take them to the camp!” As the men dragged Arlione away, Torsha noticed a flickering holopad lying close by. “Wait!”

The soldiers halted.

She walked over to the tablet, picked it up and wiped the blood drops from the beam plate. The workspace activated, floating dimly before her.

"Record me," she demanded, throwing the holopad at the second soldier who caught it clumsily.

The man stared for a few seconds, then jerked into action, navigating the display. He held the holopad up to Torsha. A three dimensional projection of the Orator then appeared in the air, mirroring her laboured breaths and quivering hair.

"People of the continent," she began. "People of the world, I come to you from the liberated capital of Guardia." She closed her eyes for a moment, and nodded with determination. "We have stopped them. We have ended this Theorian treachery.

They tried to use our technology against us – against you – by launching a merciless attack upon the Guild of Brokers and her allies.

You might wonder what our crime was, when all we ever did was offer people a better way of life and a fairer world. In the eyes of the Theorian, this is the ultimate sin. Suffering is their weapon. Suffering is their power."

Torsha raised her hand and clenched it to a fist.

"Tonight, we have broken that power." She paused – stumbled slightly – straightened. "We have rid them of the ancient magic that they used to strangle us. Some may question whether this is good or bad, but I say this – is a gift that does not serve all people truly good? The Theoria told you to sacrifice for the sake of virtue, while enjoying all the finest things life has to offer for themselves.

From this day forward, all will taste the fruits of prosperity. The tyranny is finally over."

A gentle wind began to build around them.

"We will firstly set our sights on repairing the wounds of this terrible evening. But the dawn will come, and with it healing. All I ask is that you ..."

Laughter interrupted her.

She looked to Grinloe.

He was sitting on his haunches — holding something in his hand: a gemstone fragment from the upturned bedrock of the Temple. He was euphoric.

“No ...” Torsha muttered, feeling the wind begin to buffet her this way and that. She stumbled to the dagger — picked it up — lifted her gaze to see Grinloe’s decimated face regarding her.

“The alchemy of pain makes the brightest gold —” he said, slurring, “ — the toughest steel. The Great Destiny will never leave us, as it has you.”

Thud.

Torsha watched Grinloe topple over, his glistening lips still grinning — his grey eyes dimming. The dagger now protruding from the man’s chest brought her no comfort — did not keep back the cold.

The wind softened — surged — died.

* * *
* * *

*I am so cold.
Will the bedsheets never warm my heart,
or the countless bottles drunk repair?
Nay, only with the Vellian balm,
should we be free of this despair*

Torsha's Lament, Appendix (B)

It wasn't only hate that broke the world – it was love: the love of status; the love of riches; the love of ease. These weaknesses are weapons greater than any dagger or machine; weaknesses that make good men and women do nothing in the face of evil, or worse? Become, themselves, the face of evil. That is what destroyed us.

Prisoner's Graffiti, Anon, Appendix (C)

'To the free people of Nayal, rejoice! No longer will we be chained by the misguided notions of 'self-sacrifice' and 'giving'.

The truth is that only when an individual takes for themself, can a fair distribution of bounty be achieved among the whole.

Never again will we fall for the lie of 'generosity', so that some people may accrue, while others gain only in poverty.

When wills strive one against the other, each receives their due.

The strong earn what is theirs; the weak theirs.

If each person were to take, rather than give all that they have, then each would have all that they need. All that they deserve.'

Broker's Triumph (extract), Appendix (D)

1

313 Years

It is my view that among all the dying worlds, of all the parallel universes – if there really were such a thing, of course – you would struggle to find a single realm whose survival hinged upon a single conversation between three wayward teens, in the dark belly of a dingy bar. Such is the uniqueness of our little corner of existence, where this exact circumstance came to be. And indeed, such was the uniqueness of the spiteful little hovel within which this conversation took place. Even if there were an infinite number of alternate realities, the Kwester's Keep would be entirely alone in the measure of its sordid nature and reputation. And that is saying a lot, when we consider how many dreadful watering holes there once were, both on and off our world.

Matereus, Appendix (E)

Halcyon sat in his booth, silently watching the graduation party through a veil of black hair.

The low-ceilinged Kwester's Keep was laced with the pungent stink of three hundred freshly 'made' cadets, all radiating ale, knock-off Holy Spirits and a miasma of unwashed body. Against the filthy brown backdrop of the Keep, a sea of colour moved endlessly – Military Academy graduates in their bright, digital costumes. Augmented reality armour, weapons, enhanced humans, enhanced faces, faces with animal features, animals with human faces, deadly accessories, nymphs, faeries, trolls, warlocks, goblins and magic made up a living painting of all the greatest stories ever

told, though what unfolded in front of Halcyon could hardly be described as the stuff of legend.

“Legendary stupidity, maybe,” he muttered to himself, as he watched a group of graduates take turns throwing darts at an improvised dart board—their friend’s hand.

Halcyon jumped, as an eruption of froth suddenly sloshed all over the table. Three tankards of ale had been plonked down hard in front of him.

“The best Sacraments of Dominion Krell!” An elvish knight in red armour bellowed, landing heavily on the booth bench.

Halcyon pushed his hair out of his face, and stared at the turbid liquid.

A female knight sat down opposite the two men. “Funny idea of ‘best’, Ole’”, she said, looking disdainfully at the tankard. She was dressed in the same fashionable looking armour as the first knight, except, where Oleander’s tight, red carapace plates were scarred and battle worn, Elyzia’s were as perfect as it was possible to digitally render.

Oleander stared at his sister as he brought his tankard to his face. ‘You’ve been graduated five minutes and you already think you’re too good for Kwesters finest? Hah!’ He blew through the foam to find liquid, slurping loudly.

Halcyon watched Elyzia pull a slender bottle from inside of her armour, the digital costume warping around

her hand as it withdrew. "Cadets drink that drain water you call ale. Archons drink this." She removed the stopper from the bottle, and gulped down a mouthful of golden liquid.

"Pfft. And kids that have a rich father to steal from, ay? Tell her, Hal'! Is this blessed water not divine? Did it not make 5 years of ruthless, torturous study tolerable?" Oleander raised his tankard to Halcyon with a grin.

"Sure." Halcyon replied, distractedly. A blade contest had broken out between two large men outside of the conveniences. "Look at them," he said, "cack-handed as ever."

Oleander looked hard at Halcyon, and then to Elyzia, who was coughing violently. "What you talking about, Hal?"

"Brodey and Kess. They joined the Dradanocks."

Elyzia and Oleander looked over to witness the spectacle of a 'troll' in a loincloth—Brodey— attempt to choke a 'wizard' unconscious—Kess. Their digital weapons now lay discarded beside them.

"So?" Oleander said. "Makes sense, don't it? Didn't they come first and second in combat skills? With your good self a close third." He raised his tankard in salute.

Halcyon grunted. "Only thanks to their parents' bribery. Even you two are better than them!"

Elyzia hissed like she'd been pinched. "Charity, Hal! Not bribery!"

"Whatever. Bad at blades, bad at strategy. They won't last five minutes in the Dead Zone." The red-faced, choking wizard was now reaching desperately for a stool.

"They're perfect for the Dradanocks!" Elyzia said, rolling her eyes. "I can see them right on the front line – if only to serve as bait."

"I dunno," Oleander replied, "they'd probably get on quite well with the demogorgs. Same level of intelligence, probably."

"As clever as undead monsters?" Elyzia's face wrinkled. "That's offensive to the demogorgs!"

"Well, they've already enlisted." Halcyon replied, emotionlessly. "Bragging about it after the medallion ceremony."

Oleander put his tankard down, squinting at Halcyon. He then turned to his sister. "Is it me, or does our Hal' look constipated?"

Halcyon snorted. "Better constipated than your constant verbal diarrhoea."

"I agree!" Elyzia wafted imaginary fumes away from her face.

Oleander waved a gauntleted finger at Halcyon. "I can't believe it! He's in a mood! Today, of all days?!"

“Are you sulking, Hal’?” Elyzia asked, sardonically. “Been signed up another 5 years, or something?”

“It’s not that bad,” he replied, attention still on the fight. The ‘wizard’ Kess was finally able to reach and swing the stool, clubbing Brodey on the back of the head. The animating force behind the ‘troll’s’ body vanished, and the large man crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Halcyon nodded towards the mob now surrounding the two men. “And considering the company I’d be in, it might not be so bad that *I* won’t be joining the Dradanocks after all.”

The twins both choked on their respective drinks. “You aren’t?!” They spluttered in tandem.

Halcyon turned his full attention to his ‘elvish’ friends then. Elyzia’s long eyelashes blinked steadily, while Oleander’s whisker-like eyebrows waved as his face moved through various stages of confusion.

“For Vellian’s sake,” Halcyon twitched his finger at the twins’ augmented reality faces and armour, “would you take those off? I’m not in the mood.”

Oleander looked at Halcyon, squinting, and then looked to his sister. “Have you heard this, Ely’?! Just because you might not be in the mood for celebrating, doesn’t mean we...” Oleander winced as the table jolted.

“We want to know what’s wrong!” Elyzia smiled sweetly at her brother.

After a moment of staring and sighing, Oleander relented, his returned smile more like a snarl. "Pfft. Fine."

The twins both deactivated their digital Inverse costumes and accessories. The projected forms of their armour dematerialised, revealing the very ordinary dark blue fibres of Academy uniforms, today with graduation medallions. Their facial features then morphed from those of handsome high-elf lords, back to the red-cheeked, blue-eyed forms of regular humans.

"Alright then..." Oleander began.

"...you were saying – about the Dradanocks?" Elyzia finished, leaning on her elbows.

"Well..." Halcyon began, snorting at Elyzia as she wiped the spilled ale froth from her elbows, "...my father said I can't join. He wants me at home, helping at the plantation."

"Whaaat!" Oleander.

"He can't do that?!" Elyzia.

Halcyon leaned back, shaking his head. "He can't. But he has. Told me just after the ceremony. Right after his 'congratulations'."

"The Dradanocks need recruits!" Elyzia replied. "The demogorgs are coming closer to the city, apparently!"

“Yeah!” Oleander said. “And what about all that extra arc-blade training he put you through? Why did he bother if it wasn’t to make you a captain, like him?”

“I dunno.” Halcyon shrugged. He grabbed the handle of the tankard, but pushed it away after some thought.

“Our dad told us we weren’t joining either,” Elyzia said, “but at least he gave us time to let it sink in.”

“Too right!” Oleander added. “Start of term, five years ago! *‘The front lines will be a nasty place in a few years,’* he said. Can’t be any worse than what they had to deal with though, can it?”

“What is it with these old dogs, ay?” Elyzia waved the bottle in the air. “They must have smoked the same tainted rock in the legion.” Elyzia hiccupped. “Made ‘em both dry as a demogorg’s toenails.”

“Pfft! Alright for them, ain’t it?” Oleander continued. “Heroes of the Dominion! But, us? No, no glory for us!” Oleander thumped the table, splashing the puddle in front of them. “Old hypocrites!”

“I dunno.” Replied Halcyon. “It’s a tough pill to swallow. That was my plan, you know. Qualify, enlist, work my way up. I don’t have a plan B.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Elyzia said, “Calahar—our dear father—has forbidden us from getting into politics! Can you imagine? An Orator of the Politic, preventing his own children from doing what he

did himself? Preventing us from becoming great politicians, in service to the Thranes and Archons. No. Not good enough, apparently." She scoffed, and drank from the bottle again.

Oleander laughed. "Anyone would think climbing the ranks wasn't a pillar of the religion, the way they're hamstringing us, ay, Hal'?" He sawed at Halcyon's neck with his hand.

"Aye." Halcyon replied, pushing Oleander away. "So, what are you guys going to do?"

"Inverse Games." Elyzia replied quickly.

"Aye!" Oleander declared. "If they won't let us get in on the action in real life, we'll do it remotely—fight demogorgs; have some fun; all from the safety of an avatar body. Can't complain then, can they?"

"We'll earn just as much money as the Dradanocks or a politician," added Elyzia, thumping the Holy Spirits down on the table. "But we'll be even more famous! We're going to become proper idols of the Creed!"

"If you don't die of an overdose first." Halcyon replied, shaking his head. The Games competitors had a habit of dying young—not from the games, but from relentless partying in between tournaments.

"Meh, we'll die as Martyrs." Oleander declared, chugging the last of his ale, before reaching for Halcyon's tankard.

“Why don’t you join our clan, Hal’?” Elyzia asked. “Be a shame not to put your blade skills to use.”

“Nah.” He replied shortly. “Not for me. No one ever became an Archon from playing games.”

Brodey and Kess were now back on their feet, hugging and bringing more of their companions in for a belligerent embrace.

Elyzia stared at Halcyon. She burst into laughter, when she saw that he was actually being serious. “He wants to be an Archon!”

“I,” said Halcyon, irritated, “actually have ambition in the Creed! I want to be the best.”

“Oh, Hal’.” Oleander slammed Halcyon’s empty tankard back down on the sodden table. “Don’t even bother. Joining the Theocracy’s not like signing a contract for the Dradanocks—to enlist with the meatheads, you just need a bit of skill with a blade, and some balls!”

“Rules you out then!” Elyzia snapped.

Oleander grinned as he continued. “To join the Theocracy, you need friends in high places! Or you need to rise through the military, right? If you can’t even join the Dradanocks—and you won’t join us in the games—well, may as well just get used to tending crops, ay?” He reached for Elyzia’s tankard. She batted his hand away.

“Friends in high places...” Halcyon repeated, formulating ideas as he spoke. It was a while before he

realised the twins were watching him in silence. "No," he declared. "I'm not doing the Games."

Elyzia slammed her fist in the puddle.

Oleander sighed and pushed himself back from the table.

"You," Elyzia slurred, pointing in Halcyon's face, "obviously need a change in perspective."

Halcyon frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

"The way I see it, the only real opportunity you have is sitting right in front of you." Elyzia bowed, and reactivated her digital armour. As she raised her head, her winged helmet rematerialised, framing her face and mischievous grin.

"You might be right." Halcyon replied, shaking his head at Oleander, whose fingers were skedaddling across the table to his sister's tankard.

"Might be?" she asked. "You and us combined, are an unstoppable force!"

Halcyon just shook his head.

"Fine. I'll just have to prove it to you." Elyzia picked up her tankard, again denying her brother. This time, without any explanation, she hurled it across the room.

Halcyon and Oleander turned in time to see the heavy mug smashing Brodey in the back of the head. The large man stumbled forward. His troll skin flickered, showing a stream of blood leaking down his uniform from the stool strike. Liquid now saturated him and several nearby friends.

Oleander and Halcyon stared at Elyzia.

Elyzia was now pointing at Halcyon, but her eyes were on the troll.

“Faergard!!!” Brodey bellowed, his Inverse voice enhancement making him sound even more monstrous than usual. Chairs were thrown like pillows as the man stomped through the crowd, loin cloth fluttering furiously.

“Elyzia?!” Halcyon hissed.

“Perspective, Hal’,” she responded, scampering up and over the booth wall.

“Sorry, Hal’,” Oleander said, his face sympathetic. “Sure there’s a point to all this.” He threw himself over the bench into the neighbouring booth.

“The point is she’s drunk!” His friends were gone.

Halcyon looked back just in time to see Brodey’s two handed sword rising to hit the ceiling. He ducked as it came down. It missed, hitting the table and backrest. There was no real damage from the digital weapon, of course, but the impact of the augmented reality blade

against physical surface caused projected sparks and splinters of wood to fly in all directions. That was enough to make it look real. The accompanying crack generated in the crowds' auditory implants made it sound real. The adrenaline made it feel real. Cheers filled the Keep, as Halcyon scuttled out from the other side of the table. He prompted an Inverse accessory of his own—an arc blade of his father's own company of Dradanocks. On instinct, he raised the curved sword in an upward strike, deflecting Brodey's monstrous blade as it fell towards Halcyon's head.

Both men's neurotag brain implants surged, replicating the real momentum, impact and concussion of clashing weapons in their limbs.

The troll's arm spasmed to the side, his weight following the momentum. Brodey tumbled past Halcyon into the empty booth bench.

An orb-tipped staff jabbed into Halcyon's face as he straightened, but the weapon found nothing but air. Halcyon clumsily raised his sword up, struck Kess' gnarled weapon away, rotated his own wrist and threw an arc discharge from the tip of his blade. Kess was thrown backwards through a table of tankards and Inverse playing cards, all flying into the air, along with curses and hoots of enjoyment. Halcyon activated Inverse armour with his mind prompt. Within a second, the shoulder plate caught a blow from another of Brodey's lackeys. From behind? No surprises. The digital armour held, meaning no social credits—GAINS—lost. Halcyon jerked backwards, elbow raised. He felt a crunch through his arm—not Inverse effects, real bone. Oh well, close combat was always messy.

Two more goons approached: the human dartboard still with real life darts protruding from his head, visible through a helm of digital ultraplas.

Halcyon's instincts kicked in: an infinity loop blade pattern, two arc shots releasing at the extremity of each rotation, wrist modulation actuating the trigger. This is why the Dradanocks needed good people: only the best could wield the arc-blade and get it to behave as intended. Halcyon stepped back, watching the recovering goons. His head suddenly whiplashed backwards, as a granite block of body barged him from behind.

He was cursing Elyzia, as punches rained down upon him. Then, as pummelling limbs fell away, he was praising her.

Elyzia's elvish blade, alongside that of Oleander's hammer, were stunning each member of the scrum one at a time, until the crushing layers of meathead were finally thrown off.

"How about that change of perspective, Hal?!" Oleander called, wrenching Halcyon up through the tangle of limbs.

** ** *

Bruised, and still spasming slightly from Inverse strikes, the twins ushered Halcyon through the press, and out of those large, iron framed doors to the brutal clarity of the outside world.

They plunged into the narrow thoroughfare, now busy with evening revellers in fine clothing or digital costumes—small groups of men and women beginning their night of worship in the only way they knew how: drink and drugs.

The trio ran along the avenue, weaving between clusters of people, lungs stinging on clean air and exertion. Distant shouts told of Brodey and Kess at the head of a mob, falling like demogorgs out of the Keep to initiate their own form of evening worship: violence.

Halcyon and the twins stopped when they reached a large open parade stuffed with gathered people. Something was happening in the ‘entertainment hub’ tonight, apparently.

Halcyon turned on his friends. “You idiots!” he cried, gasping for air, still in his damaged body armour.

The conspicuous elves were both hunched, breathing heavily. They exchanged a devious smile.

“Teach you to try ruin the best day of the year!” Oleander replied, wagging a finger at Halcyon.

“I was fine! I’m not now though!” Halcyon wiped blood from his nose.

Distant shouts approached from the direction of the Keep.

“Run now, argue later!” shouted Elyzia. She straightened and darted towards a dark side street with Oleander close behind. “Come on!”

“Stop, you cretins!” Halcyon hissed. “Dead end! This way!” Without waiting, he dove straight into the mass of people at the entertainment hub. He knew the twins would follow, like they did in all the wargames of the Academy – not that he really cared what they did now.

Entertainment hubs were a grid-like arrangement of many squares of seating. Each square was a bar with fixed stools orientated around a digital viewing gallery – a window in the floor to whatever form of entertainment sanctioned for the evening. Judging by the broadcast screams, and the frenetic shouts of the parade occupants, it was Inverse Games night.

“Here!” Halcyon pulled Oleander through bodies into the scrum of a viewing square. Oleander pulled Elyzia.

As they squeezed through to the bar, an explosion of jeers and shouts went up all around them. A death in the Games, apparently, and a whole load of lost bets. Halcyon grinned for the first time since the graduation ceremony, as seats were vacated. The graduates seamlessly slunk into place amid a sea of arguments, now just regular old worshippers enjoying the evening fun of danger and bloodletting – almost.

“Change your costumes.” Halcyon rasped through a pretend smile. “Here...” He accessed his Inverse accessories. A private inventory appeared in his vision. He quickly selected and transferred anonymity perks to his friends with a neural prompt.

"Ooo!" Elyzia purred, swaying slightly on her stool. She wasted no time in opening the perk, selecting a costume. Her armour was replaced with a resplendent evening gown. Her blond hair became black, while the Inverse enhancement filled out her normally angular face and smothered it with cosmetics.

"Pricey... these perks!" Oleander managed between puffs of air. He began his transformation to an old, battered vagrant. A golden feather in his dirty cap signified him as 'Zealot' of the Creed – one whose mind was lost entirely in worship, and therefore any sense of hygiene too.

Elyzia laughed. "Looking better than usual, Ole'." She pushed her brother. "Or should I say..." She read his temporary name now showing in his public Inverse profile, "...Cagney."

"You two!" Halcyon snapped. He was now dressed as a bargehst – fur coat, large lower kanines, and armour of human ribcage on a black gambeson. "You owe me..."

"You know we'll pay you back, Hal'!" Oleander cut in, dismissively. "I'll speak to papa. You'll get your perks back. Let's just try have fun, shall we? Oh dear ..." He groaned – leant on the bar with puffed out cheeks.

"Forget the perks!" Halcyon slapped Oleander's arm away.

The 'Zealot' Oleander fell forward, hit his head on the composite surface, and slid off his stool.

Halcyon turned to Elyzia. "You owe me an explanation! What was that about?!"

"Halcyon, Halcyon, Halcyon," said Elyzia reaching inside her digital robes for the bottle. "Isn't it obvious?" She swore, realising the bottom half of the bottle was gone.

A long pause.

"No!" snapped Halcyon.

"No, what?" Elyzia asked innocently, removing the cap and licking the inside.

"It's not obvious!"

She sighed. She put the cap back on carefully. "I needed to show you."

"Show me what?! That I've got maniac friends that like to get us into fights wherever we go?"

She laughed. "Yes! I mean, no. That's true, but tonight I needed to remind you what we're capable of."

Halcyon just stared.

"Brodey and Kess were the 'best' fighters in the Academy. And we just put 'em both under the table."

Halcyon snorted. "We?!"

"Ok, you."

"Hmph." Halcyon breathed deeply. "They aren't the best."

"Exactly!" Elyzia shook his arm. "Your blade skills *cannot* be wasted in your dad's stinking grow chambers! Imagine that those braindead thugs in the Keep were demogorgs in the Deadzone, they'd be lying in pieces all over the floor."

"Sure ..." Halcyon fake smiled, pointing at his nose and then his eye. Beneath the digital skin he could still feel the blood, and the eye was almost closed with swelling. "My avatar would probably be dead by now, with backup like you guys. Just like that ..." He pointed to the ground at the centre of the seating square. Through what appeared to be a large porthole, a projection of a decaying forest could be made out, seen from above: a broadcast of the latest rounds of Inverse Games. Two figures were among the trees brutally hacking and shooting rank upon rank of hideous, attacking demogorgs. A third figure lay several fathoms away from the pair, in several gory pieces.

"Look!" Elyzia replied, annoyed. "You want glory? Join us in the Games, it's the only way. *WE* finished just behind *you* in the Academy, meaning: us three are actually the best, and we didn't even bribe anyone!"

"Charity ..."

"Yes, yes, whatever." Elyzia waved the broken bottle. "You want the attention of the Theocracy, and we want ..." she turned to Oleander, expecting a response. He was slowly climbing back off the floor, holding his Academy cap to his face like a bowl.

“We get Sacraments!” she continued. “And credits. And GAINS. And we get to rub it in our old man’s face!”

“You hate Calahar that much, ay?” Halcyon asked.

“Hate?” Elyzia frowned. “No. But if he won’t support us in a career in politics, we don’t have any reason to worry about our ‘reputation’.”

“The Inverse Games ...” muttered Halcyon, shaking his head. Although the Games were a means of limited prestige, they normally drew the worst kind of contestants. The stigma of association was enough to ruin any chance in more ‘reputable’ fields. He sighed again. “No, I *can’t* help you,” he pleaded. “I’d never stand a chance of joining the Theocracy if I did.”

“Halcyon!” Elyzia cried, watching him stand and turn.

He froze in his tracks. The same vicious clamour from the Keep had reached their seating square.

Halcyon sat back down again, returning his blinking stare to the digital window in the floor.

A large man wearing a dark green hood pushed his way through the perimeter of spectators. He stopped beside Halcyon, staring at the Deadzone Forest at the centre of the square.

Halcyon knew who it was. It would have been obvious from the mouth breathing and resulting stench of ale. As it was, Kess’ face was now so close, Halcyon

could make out each individual wisp of sideburn; could see the deep dimples of a morbid smile; and the cold glimmer of a familiar, predatory eye.

"Hah." Kess grunted, staring at the grizzly projection. "Dead already?"

The comment might have gone unanswered, but for reasons that he couldn't understand, Halcyon forced a laugh.

Kess looked from the projection of the Games to Halcyon — took in the strained facial expression showing on his animalistic skin. "Hah! Lost your credits?" The 'wizard' snickered.

"Not all of them," Halcyon replied sharply, cursing himself inwardly for rising to the mocking tone.

"Oh, yeah?" Kess replied with a sneer, as another Gamer fell.

A chorus of loud swearing mixed with cheers went up as the second player was torn to pieces.

"Doing well, old man," the 'wizard' remarked sarcastically. His eyes were now watching Brody who had entered the square on the opposite side.

"If you don't mind," Halcyon stammered, trying to act cool, "I don't like talking while the Game's on. Especially when I'm two players down."

Kess snorted — turned his whole body to Halcyon now. "If you were smarter, you'd know where to put

your money, old man!" He eyed the barghest skin thoroughly, and then took in Elyzia beside him in her evening gown. "Although, she looks worth a pretty penny!"

Halcyon cleared his throat. "Don't you worry about that," he replied gruffly. The voice modulation was good, much to Halcyon's relief. "My money's safe where I'm putting it."

The third player finally fell.

More cheers and profanity.

"Don't look like it!" said Kess, laughing.

"Looks can be deceiving," Halcyon replied, fixing his eyes on the game. He felt Elyzia kick him under the bar.

The 'wizard' stopped laughing – didn't say anything for a long moment. He suddenly drew a deep breath. "I need some information."

"Oh, yeah?" said Halcyon, as indifferently as possible.

"Yeah. Three of our 'friends' came through here not long back, or so we've been told: two elves and a large rat in armour. Did you see where they went?"

Brodey was now closing in on their location.

"Nope. Can't help you."

"That's funny," he replied. The 'wizard' nodded to a broken bottle on the bar. "Politic Spirits, that. Just like the kind one of our friends drinks."

Halcyon gulped as Kess began to straighten. He spat out the first thing that came to his mind. "Information is expensive, Adherent," Halcyon stammered.

After a while Kess smiled — seemed to relax. "Hah. A righteous observation. Well then, let me offer you some charity for what you know."

"Unless you've got Holy Spirits, I'm not interested."

"Oh? How 'bout some inside knowledge. I think a betting man like you knows the value of a rigged game."

"What of a rigged game?"

"Let's just say," Kess began nonchalantly, "that the next time you put money down, put it down on us."

Halcyon turned to regard the wizard's smiling face.

Kess nodded, then pointed to the 'troll' Brodey who was now closeby, dressed in full battle armour.

"And why would that do me any good?" asked Halcyon.

"Well now," Kess purred, leaning on the bar, "you have in fact been blessed by the presence of two sons of Dominion politicians, before your very eyes. Sarhorn Kess." He placed his hand on his chest. "And Ellion

Brodey." The 'wizard' extended his arm towards the 'troll'.

Halcyon gasped dramatically. "You mean to tell me, the sons of the great Brodey and Kess seniors, are here right now?!"

"That, they are." The tall man put his arm around Halcyon, whose furry disguise pressed against the wizard's glowing robe. "And what's more, *we* will be contending in the next Games of Dominion Krell — six weeks from now."

Halcyon was speechless. Not only were these morons joining the elite legions of the Dradanocks, now they were stealing glory from the Games — and would no doubt be helped by their powerful parents to get it. He began to shake with rage.

"Now," Kess began. "You may offer me charity, for this blessing of prophecy." The wizard's eyes met Elyzia's. "Information, or otherwise ..." His eyebrows jumped suggestively.

Elyzia managed a fake giggle. "Oh, I'm not his to give." She cast a glance to Oleander who had slithered back onto his stool behind her. "Am I, darling?" She shoved Oleander.

Her brother kept his face buried in his hat. His back was now heaving.

"Ha ha ha!" Kess released Halcyon and stepped around him. "He won't miss you for a few hours." The

'wizard' scanned Oleander's fake Inverse profile, which he opened with a neural prompt. "Zealot's barely know their own names, ay? Cagney likely wouldn't miss you, ever, come to think of it. Would you, Reverent?" The pronouncement of the honorific title was laced with obvious sarcasm. He turned his grin on Elyzia. "How would you like to worship with the ascended, this night, my love?"

"My, my," Elyzia managed through a tight smile. "What an 'honour' that would be. Never met a politician." She slid her hand across the bar to caress the broken bottle. "But I'll respectfully decline."

"Hah," Kess scoffed. "Very well. His face darkened. "How'd you come by that bottle, then?"

Elyzia shrugged, innocently.

Halcyon's graduation medallion was clasped between his knuckles. In his inventory, he had his arc-blade scimitar ready to load once more. "Well, she er..."

An explosion of brown liquid suddenly washed over Halcyon, saturating the digital fur of his skin and cloak. Elyzia's evening gown was likewise covered, the sequins replaced by sludge and orange chunks.

Oleander had lost his battle with his stomach.

Kess stepped back in disgust. "Vermin!" he screamed at the 'Zealot' — whose evening of worship had now apparently culminated in spectacular fashion. "You're lucky you missed me, you putrid swamp dog!" He looked around.

The inhabitants of the square were watching Kess with a threatening intensity. Zealots were considered sanctified by the Creed, and insulting them was a major sin, even for children of the Politic.

The big teen smiled at the crowd. "Hah. I'm joking, I'm joking!" He dipped his head in false reverence, before signalling to Brodey that it was time to leave. "Perhaps I'll see you in the Games, ay, Reverent?" He made to clap Oleander on the back, but stopped his hand mid effort. "If only to use your body as an avatar. And what an honour that would be, ay? For you and me both."

Oleander was face first in a puddle of vomit.

The whole square watched Kess and Brodey in near silence.

The two met, turned, and stomped off into the parade, back in the direction of Kwesters Keep.

* * *

Lights glistened on the river Krell, as the evening fleet of small and medium sized cruising vessels went about their business. Ancient war galleys, luxury yachts and everything between hosted parties of worshippers, as Halcyon and Elyzia lowered Oleander onto a bench.

Assessing the new, glistening texture of his costume, Halcyon blew out his cheeks. "Why did they have to make digital costumes vulnerable to vomit." He flicked wet fragments from his sleeves. "Inverse magic attacks? I get that. Weapon damage? Of course. But puke?"

Elyzia looked down at her ruined digital clothes. "Maybe it's so we know when to call it a night? Imagine if it wasn't like that: you could go about your business fresh and clean on the outside, spreading chunder all over everyone as you went!"

"Suppose there's gotta be some limits." Halcyon began building up the courage to deactivate his disguise.

"Forget that, anyway." Elyzia said, throwing the remnants of her bottle into the river. "At least it got *them* off our backs."

Halcyon shook his head, not looking forward to what he was going to find beneath the costume. With a sigh, he deactivated the single use barghest skin and spread his arms. "How do I look?"

Elyzia turned to him. Her eyes widened. "Like you just stepped out of the graduation ceremony!?"

Halcyon looked down. There was not a single blemish on his navy blue uniform, aside from a small blob of blood. The smell of rotten ale had gone too. "What?!" He looked up to see Elyzia, back in the same state of pristine Academy clothing. "Whaaat?!"

Oleander stood flamboyantly, his Zealot costume deactivated.

"Tahdaa!!!"

Elyzia gawped. She looked to her empty hand, cursed and ran at her brother. "You rotten —"

Oleander just laughed, as Elyzia grabbed him by the lapels.

"You rotten ... damned ... genuis!" she finished, joining him in laughter. "See, Hal'?! See what a team we'd make?!"

Halcyon was patting his jacket, still finding it hard to believe. He snorted. "Politicians."

"Aye!" Oleander replied. "Natural tactitians, and good in a scrap too!" He sat back down on the bench, patting the seats either side of him.

Halcyon sat, his eyes on a magnificent yacht as it cruised past them. "Those fools need putting in their place," he said.

"What have *they* done?" Oleander looked at the yacht. "No Inverse skin that. That's Theocracy money that is. Look, they got kids on the deck too!"

"Not them, idiot. Kess and Brodey."

Elyzia leaned against the low wall of the river bank. She waved her finger in agreement. "Now you're talking! First they beat you to the Dradanocks, then they declare victory in the games, before it's even begun."

"They'll have it rigged." Halcyon replied. Upon the deck of the yacht, Halcyon could see figures in red cloaks surrounded by adoring worshippers, many of whom children.

"You can bet on that," Oleander said. "All the more reason to help us CRUSH them!" A digital fireball burst in Oleander's fist as he clenched it. "Imagine the odds, and a few counter bets!"

"Come on Hal'!" Elyzia wheezed. She leapt forward and joined them on the bench. "Help us embarrass the sons of *two* Orators of the Politic. That'll get the attention of the Theocracy!"

"The Creed demands it!" Oleander shouted, standing and stretching his arms to the yacht. A few cheers came back in response.

Among the congregation on the deck, at the heart of the red cloaked Thranes, Halcyon saw a face. Distant, but unmistakable. The glowing wolf mask of an Archon stared back at him, just for a second, and then was lost again amid the revery.

"An omen..." he whispered. "Fine."

Elyzia and Oleander stared, breath held.

"I'll join you."

"Yeeeee!!" The twins jumped to their feet, clapping, stopping just short of embracing.

"On one condition."

The twins stopped dead.

“A small favour from the children of a true servant to the Theocracy— the distinguished member of the Body Politic—your doting father.”

Elyzia and Oleander stared suspiciously.

“You guarantee me a meeting with a Thrane of the Theocracy, and my blade is yours, friends.”