



THE  
EDGE

BATTLE FOR  
ELD-HAIN

COLLECTION IN STORIES

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## SHADOW OF THE STORM. RAILWAY SECURITY SERVICE



“Murrah, you moron, move your ass! This isn’t a leisurely stroll, it’s a Pilgrimage!”

*It’s not a stroll, it’s a Pilgrimage!* How many times had I already promised Esma that I would punch these words back into his mouth with my fist?

Not to say I hadn’t tried, however the Knights are not to be trifled with.

Esma is a total psycho. He approached our famous, elite Pilgrims Brigade – desperados of all sorts – after he could no longer distinguish saints from demons. This was most likely a result of falling under the Cultists’ spell. How many of his own men he had killed before he was finally overpowered remains a subject of disputes, bets, and legends.

The wise guys from the Order decided to give him a second chance. Obviously, Esma could forget about furthering his career at the Holies, yet continued to demonstrate fanatic faith in the One and an equally fanatic loyalty to the Order. His killing skills did not diminish when

removing his armor, so disposing of him would have been an unacceptable waste.

After all, was it not because of people like Esma that the One showed us the way of the Pilgrimage?

So, the weirdo ended up with us, the Railway Security Service. And considering the conditions here, it was hardly a punishment for him, rather a comfortable retirement.

Truth to be told, I too was banished to the tunnel. I consider it more of a reward. I suppose I was spared for being stupid enough to let them frame me.

My *crimes* weren't all that serious: shirking, drugs, fights, petty theft. Generally speaking, a chronic lack of good manners. Nothing really bad, you may say, but when fatal battery had been added to the list, the real trouble began.

As any normal person, I just wanted to go down to the mine, do my job, and start fresh. I really meant to mend my ways. But as luck would have it, the Railway was seriously short-staffed at that time. The truth is, everyone already knew the sentence I was to receive. So, even before the trial began, the Order envoy took me aside and insisted that I volunteer with the Pilgrims, and he promised that he would secure me a place in a warm and cozy tunnel. The work would be easy there, he explained, posing minimal danger as the railway is one of the best guarded secrets in Eld-Hain. So secret that, according to Brother, even demons could be

unaware of its existence. And the food, well, it is far better than at the mine. For a murderer it's a mild penalty.

Brother's assertions that the tunnel was a closely guarded secret were lies, obviously – probably every inhabitant of our Refuge heard stories about a mysterious subterranean railway. Demons must have heard them too, of course. I should have guessed it when the little guy mentioned that vast numbers of people were urgently needed under the ground. What else, if not an army of bloodthirsty monsters from another dimension, could have caused such a sudden appearance of so many vacancies?

I should have also guessed that it was this urgent need, not me, which had beaten that unknown and probably nonexistent unlucky fellow.

But I had little to say and even less time to think, so I didn't waste it on thorough analysis. I chose the tunnel. And, as it turned out, I made the right choice – at the mine, where they wanted to send me, more demons were seen in one day than I witnessed underground during my entire six long years of the Pilgrimage.

And it was the last thing those poor guys down there saw.

The raiders not only know of the existence of our *secret* communication system with other Refuges, but they are perfectly aware of the fact that dozens of meters of underground railway tracks are the bloodstream of Eld-Hain, and of the whole civilized world. So the motherfuckers never stop trying to sever our veins.

Luckily, the Order also understands how much depends on maintaining the railway, so they don't skimp on arms or equipment for us. We even have lightweight exoskeletons here. Actually, in comparison with the armor of the regular army – not to mention the armor of the Holy Knights – these are puny toys. Yet, they make our chances of surviving confrontation with the enemy a hundred times better.

And there's the food. If nothing else, the holy guy was telling the truth about one thing: they feed us really decently down here.

To put it short, even though the dark, stuffy tunnel itself appeared to be a path straight to hell (and there are days when it is easy to believe that this is exactly just that), we usually feel as if we were at the One's workshop.

Anyhow, that's what it was like before they sent Esma to our station and made him a commander of my patrol. The doomed Knight imposed on us the kind of discipline which he himself was used to, turning our relatively peaceful life into a real hell. We all hated exhausting physical training in full combat gear, crazy running, and intensive marching he forced us to. But what we hated the most were his ridiculously solemn songs, praising the One and the fortunate fate of God's warriors who could offer Him their swords, hearts, and lives. Soon most of them received some new and a lot more interesting interpretations. But we sang them under our breath as Esma would tear us to pieces with his bare

hands for any given verse, and the holy fellas would simply hang us without trial.

Moreover, because of his fanatic nature and every second screw loose, the Saint turned out to be extremely dangerous. No sooner than his first round did he beat one of our men to death. Until this day no one knows what for. Although it took six men experienced in battle, we finally beat the bastard unconscious and overpowered him.

Commander or not, he's scum just like us.

And we insisted on calling him a Loony Saint, although many of us took a beating before the former Knight finally accepted his new nickname.

I ignored the taunt and kept walking the same even pace, not the least bit faster. I, just like the other eight men from our patrol, have learned to ignore Esma's nonsense comments.

Luckily, the daily twenty kilometer walk was slowly and happily coming to an end. The lights of the Intermediary Station One were becoming visible in the corridor, straight ahead, even from afar. Now it's rectangle, bright against the hostile darkness, grew closer with every step.

Yet somehow, this time nobody seemed happy about it.

Somewhere along the way we passed the boys from the next patrol – the tunnel was never left unattended – and we could immediately sense

that they were grim. Since the siege began, everybody was as cheerful as a loving family gathered around the deathbed.

“There is news from town”, Billygoat, the second group’s commander, said bluntly. “The Faceless were crushed by the Brute.”

“What!? How come!?” one of our men asked.

Billygoat shrugged his shoulders pointedly. Anyone who ever saw the demons fight could easily believe that they could handle even the damned bastards.

“That’s not all”, Billygoat added. His face framed by his famous beard, under the yellow lamp light, looked spooky. “They say that the enemy has already regrouped and resumed the attack. They are not wasting their time, motherfuckers! They’ll attack wildly, like never before. It seems this time the town may really fall. They will probably start calling us up soon...”

After the suffocating darkness of the tunnel, light as always promised peace, security, and some rest. But this time its soothing glow turned out to be deceptive.

Only dead bodies waited for us at the post, most of them human. But here and there one could see huge demon corpses, spiked with crossbow bolts, and ripped by steam spears. Grotesque, disgusting, terrifying. Even when lifeless, these monsters inspired superstitious fear in me.

The attack must have been sudden, mighty, and perfectly planned, as the defenders had no time to call for help. A cursory glance at the

station explained the mystery – the communication system had been completely destroyed, probably even before the attack. Our own transmitter turned out to be useless too.

Papa, the commander of Station One, and the rest of his crew stood no chance. Only Billygoat's men and we were in luck.

At least for now.

“We have to assume that nobody knows what is going on here, and the tracks are destroyed. Reg, leave your gear here and run back to get some help, just hurry the fuck up. Tell Billygoat to go down to the tunnel and run after us, and then go straight to Station Two”, Esma ordered. He was pale as a ghost but kept his cool. He looked at his pocket watch. “According to the schedule, there will soon arrive a train from Kald-Tad. They are bringing provisions for us, and lots of soldiers. You have less than ninety minutes to stop them. And I don't even want to think what will happen if you don't make it on time...”

But I thought about it. I imagined a huge superfast train, propelled by a crystal the size of a human head, derailed at full speed, and I shuddered. Until now the demons managed to derail a subterranean train only once. The losses and damages were unfathomable. The engine had exploded, and the locomotive turned into a huge fireball. The whole crew got killed, turned into ashes, or masses of formless flesh. Dozens of tons of priceless food were lost for good, and the tunnel practically collapsed. And now... A train full of people and state-of-the-art military

equipment... I gulped. Hopefully this time the One was watching over his children... and his beloved toy.

There are exactly ten kilometres of a straight tunnel between the intermediate stations, so Reg had to hurry. Not waiting for more encouragement, the lad dropped his gear and dashed back into the dark.

“Right, gentlemen, we are moving on”, Esmā ordered. “We have to try to break through to town...”

“Let’s wait for Billygoat”, I disagreed. “There must be shitloads of this filth there if they managed to demolish the whole station... With only a handful of men we don’t have a slightest chance”.

“And what change would Billygoat’s men make here? Let’s not fool ourselves, we are totally screwed. But we gotta try. And we cannot afford any delay. If we are late, the whole Eld could be gone. It looks like this time the enemy’s main target is not the railway, but the town itself. They want to take us by surprise, and kill everyone once they get inside. Pick up the crossbows, and grab as many bolts as you can find. Perhaps this time we will be the ones who surprise them...”

Esmā could be crazy but he knew what he was doing, you had to give him that. Perhaps for the first time in my life I was glad I had him by my side.

A few minutes later we were marching silently in complete darkness. Nobody knows if demons can see in the dark, but they would certainly see the light of our torches from afar.



Knowing that each step brings us closer to an inevitable fight with the practically invincible enemy, we felt more and more overwhelmed. Moreover, my unruly thoughts, annoyingly enough, revolved around my first clash with the demons.

Nobody had ever explained to us how the beasts got into the tunnel. In the end, we are nothing but expandable cannon fodder. We are supposed to fight and die, not to ask questions. Anyway, it is better for everyone if we don't know the answers. But I suspected that the little monsters would find one of the few ventilation shafts and simply creep through it like rats.

That day, in one of the first months of my Pilgrimage, we came across them during a routine patrol. They were just wandering around the tunnel and wrecking the trackway. They didn't pay much attention to us. At that moment I thought that they were desperados, just like us – no matter the cost, they had to do their job, and since they had already been discovered, they were trying to do as much damage they could before they fell under our blows.

But I was wrong. They ignored our tiny troop because they decided that we posed no danger at all, and they believed that killing a much weaker opponent was a big disgrace. To put it bluntly, they simply gave us a head start. And bless the Master of Workshops for it, as otherwise none of us would have left the tunnel alive that day...

We called for help through our transmitter, immediately alarming the whole tunnel and blocking the trains' flow, then we created a *fence*

– a barricade made with spears stuck into the ground – and waited for help, all in accordance with the procedure.

I remembered what they had taught us during our training: FIRST RULE, HOLIER THAN THE ONE'S TEACHINGS, SAID: IF YOU CARE ABOUT YOUR LIFE, AVOID ALL CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY UNTIL REINFORCEMENTS SHOW UP!, but I was still totally confused with the whole absurd situation. The veterans whispered their pleadings to God, so the demons don't attack too early, but somehow I didn't want to believe that the danger was so great. In the end, there were ten of us, big guys in mecha armor, each one expertly wielding a spear which you could effortlessly cut granite with, and on the other side there was just a bunch of freaks, not much larger than humans, armed with primitive bone maces. The demons looked disgusting, but they did not inspire fear.

At least in the beginning...

But before our reinforcements appeared, everybody in our squad was literally sick with fear. Even though the demons kept ignoring us, the hands of some Pilgrims were shaking so much that they could not hold weapons anymore, and other guys wailed like children waiting to be beaten with their father's belt. I whimpered of fear too, and at some moment, I don't know when, I lost bowel control. A few more minutes of that torture, and I would have simply dropped my gun and left my

comrades, run the fuck away, or even killed myself. Anything, just to break free from the nightmare.

When our troops finally appeared, I was hanging on probably only because I was too afraid to move. No matter what, I didn't mean to draw the Brute's attention.

But actually, I did not take part in the fight itself. Before we managed to regroup and form a battle array, the demons had eventually attacked. Despite our heavy crossbow fire, they reached us, easily broke our *fence*, and with their impetus itself they wiped out our first lines. And then, when the demons slammed into our group, a real slaughter began: before all the beasts finally fell, a dozen or so of good men got killed, and as many were more or less severely wounded. I survived probably only because I passed out in time.

Only later did it turn out that there was a shaman among the demons, and it/he simply drugged us with some poisonous herbs. Even those who came afterwards were not able to resist this damned magic.

Sometimes, when I remembered that day, I looked at Esmā and wondered what must have happened to this Knight, who was trained to fight the Occultists and their witchcraft, that it messed up his mind for good. But I knew that I would never muster up the courage to ask him...

A handful demons were enough to completely massacre our whole squad. And now we were forcing ourselves into the hands of dozens, perhaps even hundreds of those monsters...

A few kilometers past Station One we finally encountered the enemy. We heard them long before we saw them. The tunnel greedily devoured the light of our torches, but in exchange it generously shared the echo, and the beasts were not cautious at all. Well, they did not have to fear anyone. Not in such a number. There were dozens of them, really, and new ones kept climbing down the thick ropes hanging from a huge hole in the ceiling. I cannot imagine how they managed to break through without drawing anyone's attention.

The tracks, of course, had been destroyed.

We sneaked up as close to them as we could without risking to be seen, and we watched their preparations for the invasion in horror. It seemed that a whole army was going down to the tunnel.

After a while, on Esma's mark, we withdrew to a safe distance.

"Well, we are dead", Rascal decided. He was our full-time village idiot, but this time somehow he did not feel like joking. "No way we can get through. Even reinforcements from other stations won't help us. Anyhow, even if we managed to warn the Order, they would have no chance to defend the tunnel..."

"What about other patrols? Someone must have noticed what is going on here..."

Esma shook his head.

"There are no other patrols between us and the town. Did you see what was left of our shack? The attack was quick and very precise. Per-

fectly planned. Surely Prime was responsible for it, maybe even Ish herself, too. And this bitch makes no mistakes...

“No?”, I got annoyed. “So why are WE still alive?”

Loony Saint just laughed.

“Because we are completely worthless here. We cannot jeopardize their mission. How could we? And without transmitters we cannot warn our men... The only thing we have left is to earn the One’s praise.” Sparks of folly appeared again in the Knight’s eyes.

“Fuck. Someone will finally notice that the transmitters died and the patrols are not coming back...”

“Sooner or later they will notice something”, Rascal said grimly. “Certainly when the whole army of demons crawls out of the tunnel”.

“So what now?”

The question lingered in the air for a few long moments. Everyone must have quietly dreamed of running away the other way of the tunnel – in the end, our sacred duty was to take care of the Railway property, and we are nothing more than just that – but nobody dared to say it aloud. Anyway... Where would we run to? And what for? When Eld-Hain is conquered, and other Refuges run out of Crystals, nothing will stop the Horde.

“The town will fall, right?”. Rascal seemed to be reading my mind.

“Unless they manage to make the tunnel collapse in time”, Esma said reluctantly. Even he gave into despair. “But there is no chance they would... No one will warn them on time...”

“So let’s do it ourselves!” I almost exclaimed, overwhelmed with sudden excitement.

They all looked at me as if I was a lunatic.

“But what exactly should we do?”, Esma asked.

“Let’s destroy this fucking tunnel! We have *Moles* at Station One”. I was in a frenzy. “Let’s start one of the monsters, and blow it the fuck up just past the breach!”

The *Moles* are huge, but very slow machines, designed back when humankind was trying to bounce back after a cataclysm sent upon us by the One. Already then, although nobody suspected that one day hell would break loose and hordes of demons swamp us, it was obvious that the outside world was too dangerous and we could not expose the railway – which was our only chance for survival – to its evil intentions. That’s why these mechanical beasts, powered by still very primitive, yet unusually powerful steam engines, were constructed. The creation of the *Moles* is believed by many to be one of the first and the most explicit sign of the coming of *Crystal Era* - and of almost endless opportunities of development which it had brought to us. The construction of these steal dragons was exceptionally advanced at the time, but their task was trivially simple – they were supposed to drill, so we could lay the foundations for a new, safer world.

The results exceeded the Order’s boldest expectations. It turned out that the *Moles* could crush earth and rocks, no matter their kind, density or mass, at almost any depth.

Until this day dozens of these monsters – larger, faster, and far more effective than their early counterparts – drill huge shelters and new tunnels which are meant to connect all the Refuges in the future.

But this work sometimes proceeds really slowly, as the towns are separated by hundreds, sometimes thousands of kilometres, and the *Moles*, despite constant improvements, are still far too slow to satisfy the Order's needs.

So the underground connection encompasses for now only the priceless Eld and the two Refuges closest to us. This is how the most valuable cargo reaches town, especially now, when Eld is under siege.

Still, we have to rely primarily on the overground railway, which is a source of great trouble to the Order, and even greater losses, both when it comes to people and supplies.

If we were to believe the gossip, most of this railway is already cut off, so losing the tunnel would be a real disaster for the town.

But we have already lost the tunnel...

The *Armadillos*, a battle version of the *Moles*, a lot smaller, much faster, and perfectly adjusted to exterminating the demons, had become the pillar of our armed forces. Since their first appearance on the battlefield, they spread terror among enemy troops and cause massive damage. Not enough though to stop the invasion, or even to win a single battle.

At Station One there were two *Moles*, remarkably ancient. Officially, they were kept there *just in case*. But to tell the truth, everybody knew

that the Order treated the station as a junkyard for their obsolete equipment which was not worth modernizing.

“When we start this jalopy up, the enemy will hear us straight away”, Soel grunted. He was just a kid, always angry at the whole world.

“Good! We need to draw the horde’s attention to us”, Esma noticed.

“And with a little bit of luck maybe they will hear us in town too...”, Rascal added. He got back into a good mood thanks to a ray of hope sparked by our plan, which was obviously hopeless.

Just then Billygoat arrived at the station with his boys. They looked like they were running as fast as they could. We were relieved to hear that Reg had made in on time to Station Two and managed to stop the train.

“Still, there is no fucking way we will get through”, one of the bearded men noticed, when we presented our plan to them. “*Molies* are simply too slow for such raids. The demons will be all over us like flies on shit...”

“We don’t want to get through, but to make the tunnel collapse”, I said. “All we need to do is to move a few, maybe a dozen meters past the breach and blow the *Mole* up. And if they get all over us, it’s even better. The more of them we take from this world, the nicer it will be to stand before the One.

“Murrah is right”, Esma backed me up. “There is no point assuming that we will ever return home... Everybody understands that?” The



Knight took the grim silence for an answer, and then he continued: “Right, so listen now. The plan is: you all get into the first *Mole*, and clear the way for us, shooting and trying to focus the attention of the enemy. With so many men on the platform, you should be able to hang on without a problem. When you get past the breach, you have to destroy the steam release system, and then run like hell. We have very little chance of success, but we still have to try to get to town and inform the Order about everything.

“And what about you, Loony Saint?”, Billygoat asked.

“Someone has to drive the other *Mole*...”

“What the fuck for? Let’s all get into one, it will increase our chances!”

But Esmā shook his head.

“One *Moly* might be not enough to make the tunnel collapse, and I am not going to risk screwing this whole thing up. But no worries, I will be just behind you. I will blow up the engine when I get past the breach, and then I’ll be with you in a second.”

“But you want to go alone, with no backup?”, Rascal asked.

“In a bloody armor, or with a sackcloth on my back, I am still, for fuck’s sake, a Holy Knight!”. Esmā got impatient. “I’ll be fine, ok? Start this crap up, and let’s go!”

The *Moles* turned out to be real monsters, indeed; they were monstrously loud, and monstrously slow. A man walking backwards in the dark would be able to keep up with them. But they were also huge, and

extremely solid. With enough people, crossbows, and a big supply of bolts, hidden on a platform over a dozen meters above the ground, we could successfully fight a whole army. At least for some time.

The drills of the *Moles* were a bit bigger in diameter than the tracked vehicles themselves, and once set in motion, they became weapons which nobody and nothing could confront.

But the tunnel had been enlarged many times by newer models, so the demons could easily avoid meeting our toys face-to-face.

Most of the Pilgrims were sitting on the platform, but a few of them, including Billygoat and me, were walking next to the machine so we knew what was going on, at least roughly. The driver's view was completely blocked. He was blind.

Just like a mole.

Just as we hoped, the roar of the dead beasts provoked the living ones to attack. Long before the *Moles* approached the breach, we saw the horde. A whole swarm of demons was charging at us. But before they could reach us, we jumped on the platform, and Billygoat shouted to the driver:

“Maneuver!”

The steel monster, obedient to the orders of the stick, began to bounce off of the sides of the tunnel, biting off bits of its walls, and reaping a bloody harvest. Esmā, who was driving a few meters behind us, took up the idea, although we did not leave many enemies for him.

Those demons which still managed to squeeze past the first *Mole* – and there were far too many of them – immediately began to climb up our platform. Luckily, the light automatic crossbows, which were a basic equipment of the guards who used to watch us (as if anyone would be so stupid to think of mutiny or escaping the tunnel), and our good old mechanical spears handled the problem great. All we had to do was to knock off the enemy, and Esma's *Mole* would finish it off.

Esma himself was doing quite well; every now and then some demon fell off his *Mole's* platform. Usually dead.

The drive was extremely slow, the tunnel swarmed with beasts, and our losses were bigger and bigger. The most painful thing for me was the discovery that Rascal was missing. They got Billygoat too. One of the Brute climbed onto his platform and crushed his head. A while later the damned demon got minced by Esma's drill, but the beardy could not be saved.

We had ran out of bolts long before we reached the breach, but still – although with great difficulty – we managed to stay in the saddle. The most critical moment was when a division of occultists threw themselves straight under our sting. As pieces of their corpses were thrown all over the tunnel walls by the drill, the air filled with toxic gas. Under its influence we all started hallucinating, and we were not entirely sure anymore if we were still fighting the demons, or maybe just our own delusions and each other.

After a few really tough moments the hallucinations passed, but then it turned out that over half of the crew was dead, and the demons were jumping all over the *Mole* like fleas on a stray mongrel.

My left arm was badly cut, and my head was bleeding. The spear was destroyed, so I grabbed the one which used to belong to Billygoat, tore off the backpack with a steam engine propelling it off of my dead friend's shoulders, and then I got back to defending the platform.

Time crept even slower than our vehicle, the enemy kept attacking, and I was running out of strength. I was getting more and more dizzy, and my arms were stiff with tiredness.

Luckily we finally reached the breach. New enemies kept coming down the ropes and rope ladders, and a few of them jumped down straight onto the platform. We fought them off with our remaining strength, but we paid for this victory with enormous losses. There were only three men alive besides me, including heavily wounded Soel. The boy's stomach was ripped, and his intestines were spilling out between his slowly stiffening fingers. Tears were pouring down his face. Staggering, he approached the edge of the platform, and then he threw himself on two Brute who were about to climb onto the top. The surprised demons could not hold onto the *Mole*, and a moment later they all smashed against the trackway.

I said goodbye to the hero with a loud curse, and then I shouted:

“Now! Blow up the *Mole*!”

“RUN!” I screamed and was about to jump off the vehicle, desperately avoiding the demons trying to get me, but suddenly I froze.

Esma’s *Mole* had stopped over a dozen meters behind us, just under the breach. Its engine roared and smoked more and more. The Saint himself fought with several demons at once on the ground; apparently the beasts knocked him off of the platform.

“Run, Esma! The Mole will explode any second!” I tried to cut through the death roars of the two dying monsters. And I guess I succeeded, as the Knight turned my way.

“I’m a loony, remember?” He laughed wildly, and he affectionately patted the track of his steel monster. This short moment of his inattention was enough for the Brute to get him and tear into pieces.

Then I understood. From the very beginning Loony Saint had planned to blow up not only the whole tunnel, but also the army gathered over it, even though he knew full well it was a suicide mission, and its success was doubtful at best.

Not looking back, I jumped on the ground and started running as fast as I could. Some demon tried to block my way, but I was faster. Before it could crush my head with its huge mace, I thrust the spear into his body so hard that the mechanism cut through the bone armor, the demon’s skin and flesh with a grinding sound, then it whirred louder, and finally stopped in the massive chest.

I dropped the useless weapon, still stuck in the dying monster's body, and ran on, wondering how much time I had left before the pressure of flammable steam causes the *Moles* to explode, and the blast of fire wipes off everything on its way.

Will I make it or not...?

I didn't.

Suddenly the tunnel shook violently, and an unbelievable blast tore my ears. A split second later a wave of hot air threw me forward. Luckily I passed out before I hit the ground.

When I came to, it was quiet. Not a living soul around. Was it possible that I was the only one who survived this hell?

I was bruised all over, and my burnt skin hurt mercilessly.

Still, I got up and dragged myself back through the tunnel. Considering my state and the fact that I had no weapon, it would be hard to deny that it wasn't the smartest decision in my life. But I knew that if I don't present the high command with a full report, I cannot show up in town.

Before I reached the rubble closing the passage for good, I came across only one body.

It was a demon. Dead, or maybe just unconscious. I wasn't going to take any risk. I took a big rock and kept hitting its hard skull until all was left was a bloody mess.

Then I slowly walked towards Eld-Hain.

I never found out what happened to Tyarg and the other Pilgrim, who was still alive when we blew up the *Mole*, and whose face, smeared with blood and soot, I did not recognize in the heat of the battle.

“Code red!” I shouted when I saw the first people.

It worked. The soldiers, without asking any questions, took me straight to the high command, where I was received immediately. Staggering on my feet, I told about the events in the tunnel to an old man with general’s insignia and a group of his officers. When I finished, the latter started asking me more or less ridiculous questions, yet I answered them as honestly as I could. In the end the old guy got impatient. With one grunt he stopped the whole circus, and his boys left straight away to organize a rescue mission. As it turned out, a strong force was waiting already for an order to leave from the moment the words *code red* were spoken. The soldiers got into draisines, equipped with engines, and left into the dark.

“You do know what is going to happen to you if all this turns out to be a lie?”, the general asked, rather aggressively.

“Let me guess... You will lock me up in the tunnel again?”, I talked back. I had enough of all of this. I just wanted to sleep. Or better: die.

The superior looked at me for a while, and then he visibly softened up.

“Tell me, soldier, do you have any demons on your list?”

“Until now I was granted only one...”

“So if you are telling the truth, now you can add a whole fucking legion. And that means that you will not only get your freedom back, but you will

become a bloody hero... They will give you a medal, throw an official banquet for you, ask you to give a speech in front of the townsfolk... In a few days you will regret that you hadn't died in this fucking hole, you'll see. "I was so tired that I barely registered the sense of the general's words. Only what the old man said next caught my attention: "Ok, now go to the barracks and let the medics tend to your wounds, or you will really kick the bucket here. Then wash yourself and eat something, and if you feel strong enough, you can join the celebrations."

I gave him a blank look. Celebrate? What the fuck should I celebrate? So many good people had died in front of my very eyes, I can barely stand on my feet, the town is on the brink of doom, and he thinks I will start dancing with joy?

No, at that moment even freedom seemed bland to me...

"What are you staring at, hero?", the old guy urged me. "Dismissed!"

A soldier, called from some other place, walked me to a huge elevator. When we stepped into the cabin, my heart raced nervously. The elevator shook awfully, and after a short while we were on the surface.

And then came another disappointment.

After so many years spent underground, breathing the air from the outside: cool, clean, not so thick, and free from poisonous miasmas of the railway, which penetrated the whole tunnel, simply hurt me. It was strange and unpleasant.

I did not think about it for too long, as I saw joyous commotion around.

"What is going on here?", I asked the military man escorting me.



“You don’t know?” The soldier looked very surprised, then he smiled mysteriously and pointed at numerous windows of the station. “Look at the sky”.

The view of the boundless space scared me so much that only after a while I recovered from shock. And then I saw... an anomaly.

Up in the air, some figures zipped to and fro, three in each group, patrolling the sky over town. They were flying so high that they seemed no bigger than hawks. But you could not confuse them with anything – those were not birds, but winged people! Each of them wielded something resembling a scythe.

“Who... what is it!?” I blurted out, astonished.

“A real miracle!”, the soldier said with reverence, and I finally understood what the general really meant when he spoke of celebrations. “The One heard our prayers, and he sent his angels to fight!”



# THE SONG OF KRAK THE SCREAMER



**Verse 1**  
*The walls are tall  
But tall walls fall  
And sentries choke on dust*

I am called Krak the Screamer. But it was not always so. There was another Krak. And I was just one of the legion. This was when my leg was whole. Before I wore his skull upon my belt.

Many stand taller than I. Many run faster than I. But no matter how tall or how fast or how strong, all follow me through the wastelands. My screams break the silence before us, and they cut a path for me to follow. My screams brought us to these walls. They echoed back to me and were answered from within with wails of despair and howls of broken hopes. The cries met and mixed and bred until the noise was so great, the very stones shook with anticipation. My screams have brought us here. And my screams shall carry us beyond.

The wastes stretch out before the legion. And looming ahead, ripe for the taking, one of their camps. It's walls tower high, 10 staves at least, and there are gates of hard rock that seal shut. From within the walls, we've seen blasts into the sky from one of their damned great-toys. No matter. It is still just a camp to me.

It is time for me to mark this place. To call the tricksters back, and sound out our disdain. There is a pulsing heat where my foot used to be, as I lean heavier on my staff. The power of our people runs through me. The will of the Brutes washes over me in waves, carries me aloft and I am gone. Disappeared into the cold and dark nothing of silence.

The corners fade into focus. I see light flicker. This is our destiny, our victory, our dominance. It is cool and still. The veil lifts further and I smell the smoke from our Cook fires and the charring meat above them. As my tongue flicks against my fangs there is the sweet taste of copper in the air. The ground is solid beneath my hooves. Both hooves. In this place I am complete.

The dead quiet is disturbed by a drone. A low buzzing taints the sanctity of this place. It comes from the edge of my awareness. There is no source. I cannot tell if it was always here or...

It opens. Gets louder. Comes more into focus. It still has no source. It is everywhere and nowhere at once. But I know this sound. I have heard it before. When I was young I used to dream it. It pitches and rolls. The sound is alive. It moves inside itself. Inside me. And I am ripped from this place.

The cold of the rain plays on my face. I am leaning hard upon my staff, my empty leg no use to me now. And I hear it. The drone. The buzz. No longer out of reach of my ears. No longer a mystery. Me.

My throat is tearing, as it always does. For a long moment there is nothing in the world except the sound of me. Of my undying voice. My

song is the will of our people. For a moment I am the world. And the clay trembles beneath me.

It is not long before they appear on the horizon, returning to the fold of the legion. Terror Caste. I trust none of them, the shadowers. Tricksters. They skulk and slink in the shade. They prey on weakness in minds. They have ink for honor. If they had to battle in the wastes, bone to blade, blood to blood, our kind would have already faded into the black forgotten nothing of the Gods.

But more than this, their methods of madness and mayhem, is the smell. Not the great-unwashed, foul stench that wafts from beneath their tatters. Far worse. When they return to the horde, clackering to one another, slavering and frothing. It's their excitement that I smell. Excitement from a moon's turn of sowing fear into the hearts of the weak, the young, the infirm. I smell their disgrace.

I long for a day without them. A day when our strength is all we need. When the smoke and slime of the tricksters has faded into memory. But that day has not yet come to pass. We remember the disaster on the hollow banks, and our defeat stings anew. For now we need them.

For now...

The battle spews forth onto the field. I watch it from a mound between their camp and ours. There is resistance from the runts. Good. A prize taken and not earned is not worth having. The runts fight. First with their darts. I watch as the few weaker of our number are thinned

out. Good. If a dart from a toy can fell you, then you were not ready. And the readiness is all. But soon the runts panic and flee. For a dart is nothing next to the crushing weight of our staves.

And then their warriors reveal themselves, Concealed amidst the knolls, crouching in the dry river bed, and flinging themselves from the walls into our midst. Cleaver runts. Clad in their hard rock helmets, armed with their vipersticks and small walls. These runts are admirable. They are outnumbered. They fight on. They are outsized. They fight on. But they are nimble runts and they flitter back and forth through the air. From across the field, through the din of combat, I hear the death-rattle of one of our own. The low moan and gurgle as his lights dim at last. The shamans cannot save him.

At this, their gates open up and onto the field flood their littlings. Their little toys roar in their little runt paws. These stinging spears are dangerous. But they are not. They charge toward their death with ragged glee and are happily carved to ribbons and crushed under our power. It is almost admirable how they meet us beneath their walls. No armor. Fearless. They chant and intone. Seemingly thinking they are protected by their god. A pity for them, really. If they knew their fate, of being splattered into the mud, would they come running so fast?

Some of my brutes are taken from us. Against such numbers it is inevitable that some of the mighty will fall. It is not my will but the will of the Primes, “those-who-know-and-consider” that kills my brothers.

I would not have it so. I would have our entire force up front at once to smash the runts. I would join them in glorious combat and feel the blood upon my face and the roar of the dying all around me. I would hurl myself among them and my brothers would rally to me. I would scream the walls down. But the memory of the hollow banks visits me again and I am sated for a time. I will obey “those-who-know-and-consider.”

Their mounts come now through the gates. Great, heaving beasts, snorting and snarling. Their riders clad all in armor. Formidable. Strong. Our dogs outnumber them four to one. Again, a pity for them. The mounts are harried and scattered as their warriors are pulled down to the ground. Beneath their armor they have flesh as soft as mud, and soon the muck of the field is a stew of red and brown. The churning of bodies into the clay gives me an uneasy feeling. Something is not right.

Two of their number slip through our lines and charge one of my brothers. He takes not one step back. Because he is strong. He meets the attack head on, with focus and quiet pride. He falters only for a moment under the viperstick. His arm comes off at the shoulder in a wash of butchery and pain. He is undaunted. He takes the only course left to him and redoubles his attack. He is a hero of our kind, but it is too late. There is no cry of anguish, no whimper fear. No time even for the disappointment of failure. He fights to his dying breath and beyond. And another of our lights goes out.

As the mounts are knocked from beneath them, their warrior knights are dazed. The dogs make quick work of them now. Soft as mud. The dead on both sides begin to choke the field. And something is still wrong. Missing. Where are the faceless carrion?

Our forces surge forth toward the gates. The fighting rages on in the field but we are now so close. Soon we will be inside their walls. And I open my maw to signal for the onslaught.

Peaceful silence. Lying on my back upon the dead grasses, two moons dance above me. They weave back and forth through the night sky as the hours pass. Even the night sky is a sickly yellow pallor and I know our time here is coming to an end. The talk has begun amongst the Primes. The preparations have begun and the portals will open soon. We have done all we can for this world but we were not in time. The damage caused by the Skarns was too great. The beasts that they were, they stripped this land of its life for their own carnal pleasures. They hollowed the mountains and they raped the waters until there was nothing left but poison. Yes, we tried to save this world. Yes, we rid it of the Skarns. But the healing tinctures of all the shamans at once cannot enkindle a light that has gone out.

The portals will open and we will find a new home. We will find a land that needs us, a land that cries out for aid from the beings that should protect it. We will go to this new land, as we have done many times before. We will help it if we can. And maybe this time, we will not be too late.



The blood from my throat issues forth in a mist. I feel it in my mouth. I see the world through a red haze when I open my eyes. My screams echoes back from against their walls and I hear myself. Everyone on the field shares that. We can all hear my song.

And as they hear it our powers break forward. The all-out attack my brothers and I have been longing for. All of our kind - tricksters, dogs, brutes, those-who-know-and-consider – united.

The bloodfever is high in me and my focus is acute. I do not long for my long rotten leg. I no longer need it. If I could move as fast as the rest I would not be so angry, so driven. My warstaff would not crush with so much power. I would not be Krak the Screamer. But I am. And I can stand upon my anger with the heat of the bloodfever.

It's a strange style I use. I've had to adapt. I'm lower to the ground than most. I can see clearly into their eyes. And my warstaff arcs wide, in line with the ground, no longer the smash from overhead. I keep it moving fast. I spin with it, a whirl of devastation to my foes. Three of the littlings close toward me. I dig my staff hard into the clay and launch myself toward them. They are unprepared. I feel the first's bones snap under my weight and he is crushed. The second is knocked down and sends his stinging spear across the bare chest of his fellow. With a shriek, the third folds in on himself and collapses to the ground. It's only a moment that the last littling takes. The shock of killing his own comrade is over so quickly. But it is all the time I need to swing my warstaff from my resting

place atop his first brave friend. He leg gives way and he cries out, falling onto his back. The irony is not lost on either of us. His cries flood with pain as I lift myself up to my hoof and tower over him. He fought well, to the best of his ability, but he is not martial like me. I have been fighting since before he drew his first breath and I can see, in his eyes, he knows. He never stood a chance.

I do him the warrior's kindness and end his pain. He deserves as much. My weight on his small head, and his cries are over forever. It's true, I make less of a splash with the blood of my enemies now. But I enjoy the combat all the more. And I respect even the littlings that charge into the field to do battle with me. Because even with one leg I am more than amenance to them.

The Masters are the first to turn. At first I do not see it. The bloodfever is a blessing and a curse. It makes us all more than we are – harder, stronger, fiercer. But it takes away the mind. Not all of it, but enough to keep from noticing the things at the edge of perception. It's not until I feel the chill of the blast rush past me that I am aware. The shards of white frost dart back towards our rear and followed close behind it: a Master of ice and fire, moving as fast as his legs can carry him.

The dust kicks up all around and overhead another figure goes hurtling to our rear, a Master of wind and lightning. Thunder explodes above me and a hideous crash of purple energy cracks through the sky. What is happening? What do the Masters know? What have they considered?

I look back. I can see nothing but dust and the ash of explosions in the air. Now some of the hounds have turned and lope back to rear. We have been attacked. From behind? Cowards! But how? I had tracked so carefully. None had followed. I am sure of that. This is where my screams told us to go. I could not have misheard them. This is to be the staging ground for our glorious victory. What has gone wrong?

A gust of wind clears the smoke for a moment and I see a figure. At first I don't believe my eyes. The jagged, spiked silhouette and shambling movement is unmistakable. One of the carrion. Smoke blows in again and I lose sight of it.



A blast of hellfire explodes beyond and I see the gruesome outline. The bladed arms of the carrion stab into a hound, a live hound. The dog spasms and shakes as the carrion lifts it into the air. For another moment I cannot believe my eyes as the carrion lifts his head to the still-quaking hound and begins to feed. The blast light fades behind the scene as the offal spills out onto the carrion and I see no more.

The terrible truth wells up in me. The primes did not plan for this. Even the cursed succubus could not foresee it. They did not know and could not consider. Once more we are beset by foes on all sides. What comes now is not a scream, but a howl. The beast of all my forebears erupts from me and I make a sound unlike any I have before. I am not lost and I taste no blood. I use all my being to summon our herd to

arms. But the legion stretches out far. Can I reach them all? With one long guttural moan I hope my message is clear: forsake the city, forsake the Chapter, our flanks crumble, reorder and charge back to where we came from.

The warriors of the runts waste no time. As part of our legion pulls back, their holy knights charge after, routing where they can, cutting down those they think to be fleeing. This would be a fine lesson and it will be one day. Never flee. They pursue until they see it themselves. The carrion have changed and now visit violence upon the living. And the runts soon panic and retreat to their little walled camp.

A pack of the legion rallies to me and we assail our own rearguard. We number nine angry brutes. All nine, I have seen before. Fine warriors, each one. If I am to die this day, then I am in good company.

They form a phalanx behind me and I lead them into the unknown. The smoke chokes and blinds us. The wretched Masters loose their elements wildly and in vain. All around are the cries of the assaulted and set-upon, and the horrid, wet sounds of the carrion feeding.

There are blasts all around us. Shadows skip in the fog of war from every side. There's no telling where we are or what we face. I fear now we are in too far. But there's nothing to do but go forward. Further into the maelstrom.

Without warning, the phalanx is broken from the side. I've never, in all my years of battle, seen something so big move so fast. First, there is

the crash of rock onto bone. Then the groan of my brother as his head is utterly shattered under the force of this thing. It is carrion, no doubt, the screeching bawl betrays its origin to me. But it is so much bigger than it should be. It stands taller than I and is at least as broad as a brute champion. Where one of its limbs should be there is a great slab of rock that it wields as a small-wall and smashes another of my brothers. There is no time for measured thought, only the bloodfever, and I hurl myself at this monster.

It has been many ages since I was young. I have long since been crippled and had to learn to fight and command while leaning upon my weapon. I remember all the prices paid and the lessons dearly bought along the way. I do not remember the last time any foe could weather my charge and stand to. But this monster caught me.

Stunned to find myself held tightly in the grasp of this... thing. My arms pinioned between the thick, rock-like crags of its body. I shake and writhe but I cannot break loose. It is jagged maw gapes widely at me, at my throat. Once again, no time for thought. My reaction is swift, vicious and stupid, but it is the only thing I can do to save my life. I strike at his eyeless head, as hard as I can, with my face.

The pain is sharp. It is fangs catch me on the snout, the jaw snaps shut and my blood is spilled. The third arm of the monster tears at my chest. More blood spills. I will not last long like this. I let go of my

warstaff. I wrench harder on my captor but it has me firm. I pull again. Now the third arm wraps around my middle and draws me in close again. And as it does I lift off the clay and with one hooved foot crash down upon the creature's leg. That hurts it.

It shrieks and its jaws release. The grind of my horn against its hard hide pries me out of its mouth, but I am still no freer from this thing.

I hear my brothers through the smoke but can no longer see them. They urge me onward but do not interfere. A brute would not dare steal the honor of another.

A brute would not. These are the words in my mind as I see the bloom of purple from behind the shatterer. The colored light collects, focuses, and explodes as I have seen it do many times before, but never from this direction.

I do not feel the creature release me. I do not feel the mud as I fall to it. It is strange. I feel no pain at all. For a brief moment I smell the smoke of cooked flesh and I collapse, face first, into a puddle. Now I smell nothing, see nothing, feel nothing. I would scream but I do not hear myself. Instead I hear the condemnation of my brothers. They rebuke the Master for his meddling. One calls on him for winds to clear this smoke. Another cries out for a Shaman. "The Screamer falters!!!" I sink further into the mud and there is quiet.

I try to scream. I cannot. I try to stand. I cannot. How can it end like this? I am Krak the Screamer. I have seen a hundred worlds fall before my kind.

I have stood on the bones of those that would destroy me for eons passed. And now? Here I lie. Laid low by our own Master. By mistake.

It is not my will, but my brother that pulls me back to life. He lifts my limp shell out of the muck as the Master's wind begins to whirl. The smoke now whips away under the power of the Prime and we can once again see the field.

The mauve mists in the sky below begin to threaten the field. Another blast from the runts great-tower flashes downward into the air and the clouds immediately recede. In the arms of my brother I turn my gaze upward. The brown and bracken comes into focus. As well as the true horror.

The carrion are all about us. Even upside down I can see our ranks have become an abattoir as the monsters range and devour. They feed on the living. My brothers fight back even as they are consumed. All our force could crush these carrion. They must be told. They must be rallied.

The last of my strength. I feel it waning. My last chance is now. All of my mettle to call on the legion. To let them know. If not I, then who? Who will call the herd? Who could salvage our assault? As my brothers bear me to the shamans I lift my head. My blood runs down my face and again I taste copper. If we are defeated here today, it will not be the failing of me.

And I scream until the lights go out.

**Verse 2**  
*The blades will blunt*  
*The gored will grunt*  
*And the steel turns to rust*

From far off I hear the clash of combat. My eyes adjust and the sun is lower in the sky. The bright azure ceiling of this world has taken on hues of orange and pink. As I turn my head against the rocky earth to take in the world, sensation returns to me sharply.

My face throbs with a fierce sting. It starts at the right side of my jaw and wraps around until it meets itself in the back of my head. I have lost more fangs, and more scars shall mark me now. My heart thumps as if it would burst through my chest-plating. Feeling with my paw I realize that my armor has been replaced with a binding of brown cloth that already has a weeping stain of my blood--the work of a shaman. It seems this binding is all that would hold my heart in place. And my heart pounds, trying to escape my body. I have never felt such complete pain before. But all this is but a shadow of the true torture. I have fallen in battle and allowed my foe to defeat me. Again. A groan escapes me.

“Welcome the pain, Screamer. As long as you feel pain, you yet live.” The shaman’s voice is deep, in spite of his small frame. As he kneels over me, his whole body sounds out its displeasure with the world. His bones creak and crack. Pouches and vials of powders and tinctures hang from his every part. They rattle together in a tiny, orchestral cacophony. And his tusks snap one another as he speaks. Though he bears me no malice, to see and hear him is bitter salt in the wounds of my failure.



My arms quake and my stomach heaves as I pull myself up. I am weaker than I remember ever feeling. “If I yet live, I shall rise. If I yet rise, I shall fight.” The large shaman’s hand reaches out to steady me and his dark voice joins my ragged one in the proverb of the brutes. “If I yet fight, I shall prevail.” And he pulls me up to stand on my one good leg. I can still stand. I cannot help but smile at that.

The sting on my face wells up into a fierce and intense stabbing and my smile vanishes. I tongue the hole left by my broken fangs. The shatterer took at least five from me. I shall have to seek retribution from the carrion for that.

“Bring the Screamer his weapon.” The shaman’s voice rumbles as he speaks, the herald of healing.

For an instant, rage consumes me, and I bark out, “I am not some whelp, my brother!” The shaman tilts his head and regards me for a moment, showing no sign of anger, reproach or even understanding. His empty white eyes simply stare back into mine and I regain a degree of composure. “I can find my own weapon. I do not need it fetched for me as if I was the succubus.”

“Screamer,” his dark voice rumbles again, “mayhaps you did die a long time ago. And you are simply too stubborn to lie down.”

“Mayhaps. Then you had best point me to the fray, bloodsmith. When the Khyber calls me I shall join our blessed fallen there. But I do not hear it calling for me yet.”

Our battle lines have crumbled. The primes have said “No design of attack holds beyond the first encounter with the foe” and those-who-know-and-consider have proven themselves again. The field of battle has spewed far from the walls of the city. The smoke of battle has been washed away by the winds of the Masters. It is replaced by the darkness of night. And as the shadows lengthen I can see that our legion has split into warpacks. We fight campaigns that end in the length of a breath. And then move on to fight again.

These carrion are harder than the humans. They are harder even than the brutes. And without our tools of war, our staves and hammers and great swords, the pitch of the battle would have a very different tune. I am not alone for long.

I come upon them as they have fallen on one of the carrion. Out-numbered, four to one. Two tricksters, each with a dog, ensuring this carrion will feed no more. Their blades and claws run blue with the gore of the carrion. Normally I would scoff at such an act. There is no nobility in this deed, no test of strength or will. It is a massacre amid massacres. This chaos is sickening.

“Cultists, enough.” I do the best I can to conceal my disgust but my voice betrays me. I have never been good at deception or lies. I am not like the succubus. They do not listen. Their milky and weak version of the blood fever blinds them until I bring my warstaff down on lifeless body of their quarry, splashing more of the blue gore up onto them. “I have said enough! Follow me. There is need of you elsewhere.”

The hounds are cowed instantly. The pets recognize power. They can smell it, and they fall in behind me. The tricksters, however...

“Yooooou...” breath wheezing and whistling deeply through a mawful of the trickster’s crooked, brown teeth, “are not one that weeeeeeeee... answer toooooooo.” It turns its face toward me now, its yellow, leathery snout pushing from beneath the tattered black cloak that covers the rest of its foul head.

“Yhou!” the other pipes in, with shorter and sharper wisps of speech, “a’ injað. Where yhou ahrma?” I feel up to the blood-stained bandages that have now dried against my chest. Foolish not to bind myself in my armor, but the bloodsmiths will need to look again upon my wounds. The bat-like face twisting into what passes for a smile among the tricksters, and its long ears wiggle as it points to my missing leg. “Yhou cannuteven STANNN by yhouseffff. What happen if we’s take yo little stykk?”

“Then you would have the Screamer’s staff.” The voice radiates from behind me, clear and confident, filling the air with the heat of authority. I turn and see that this is what the hounds had smelled. They crouch for employment before an inky blackness that quickly coalesces into a figure, shorter than me, but full of gravity. The two skulls on his armor have eyes that glow with an eerie blue light and all four of his arms swing easily at his side as he walks. A Master of shadow and glow. “But I do not think you could do it.” His jet black robes appear to hang loose and flow about him, even on the windless plane. The Masters are always

full of mystery. What's to say that he isn't just playing with the light, making us see what he wants us to see?

"The Screeeeema.has faoulllen."

"We's knowin'. We's heareen."

"Your knowing is corrupted and your hearing is false." I stand taller and lean less upon my staff. Again I feel the pain in my chest and icicles of fire shoot through my face as I speak. "If you are right, then I am just another wounded brute. Wager your lives that I am not Krak. Come and take my stick, trickster."

"No!" The Master's voice cuts the air all at once. "If we all survive the night there may be time for this pettiness later." As he pauses, his eyes meet mine. "For now we much rid the field of the faceless distraction before we can hope to claim our prize. And you will all help us to do that. Now follow." With that the Master strides forward, full of purpose, flanked by his hounds, further into the darkening battlefield.

All primes have such command, the timbre and tone of the voice to rattle bones. With all my screaming I cannot echo such skill. There is something else to those-who-know-and-consider.

The Master lights the way for our band. The cracks in the clay are seen only by us, those under his power, or else we would be fumbling through the darkness like fools. Especially me. The hounds make their way well enough and the tricksters scramble along even in the light of day. With the Master's glow I can see only his silhouette. He moves with

ease and grace, his upper arms raised slightly to control his element, his lower arms swaying with motion, as if we were not in a fight for our lives. He is calm.

That calmness is quickly disturbed. The first nest of the carrion we fall upon lies in wait in an impression in the firmament. The disgusting sucking sound of two of the beasts, feeding upon one of the mounts of the Chapter, stops the Master in his tracks. The tricksters make a move to advance before we are seen. The Master holds up his hand. I see what he sees.

These carrion are different. Both have two long arms sticking out of their backs. As they lie almost prone and feed on the mount these arms work in a frenzy into the shadow, just beyond their meal. The thought occurs to the Master as well and he extends the scope of his glow.

Now we see the rider of the mount, his armor racked open, his helm missing. The arms of the monsters act in concert, one ending in a hideous blade spinning on its axis, the other a piercing claw. The blades slice and cut with terrible speed. There is an incision, a spin, another cut, a spin, and all the while the twisted claws pull on the sinew and bone, rearranging the corpse into a horrible parody of itself. Just a few paces behind me I hear the tricksters rattle with fear.

The Master raises his lower arms and the light ripples. Those not under his influence are now in the darkness, but not us. We see. The dogs have been tense all this while and now they feel sweet release as

they charge toward their unknowing prey. Not wanting to miss the first blood, I join the charge.

The hounds both leap upon the first carrion, their bloodlust high. The first clamps its jaws onto the leg of the creature and tears it hard. The second leaps on top of the now wriggling monster and bites down on its bladed arm. There is a loud crack and I cannot tell if it is the bones of the carrion or the teeth of the hound.

The other monster stands now, in the dark, but aware of the danger. It crouches and its bladed arm swings out in front, whirling like the elements themselves. For certain it is deadly, but as it is blind I take little heed. I swing my warstaff hard at the blade.

First blood. This is why we train. Why we never stop. This is the reward for tireless endurance. The feeling through my warstaff of bone cracking. The sound of the foe crying out in anguish. The spray of gore on my face. Nothing is like first blood.

The monster's bladed arm crumples under my staff. The joint snaps and blue ichor spills onto the ground. The spinning blade twists and slashes into the creature's own chitinous body with almost unperceivable speed. The first three stabs ricochet off the exoskeleton with sparks before the blade penetrates deep into its own soiled flesh. More of the foul blue bile runs down the leg of the carrion. In a desperate attempt at some defense the creature lashes out at me. Its long, clawed arm shoots

out and grabs at my trunk. Had I my armor, this pathetic lash would mean nothing, but I am protected only by a bandage and my will.

The beast's claw rips through my binding with ease and finds my wound. It pushes into me and I let out a roar of pain. I feel it groping around and grabbing inside my body, as if it would find some organ to tear out and thus win the combat. I do not give it the chance.

"Cursed carrion!" I bellow as I swing my staff around low, bringing the foot up to the carrion's head. As it opens its maw to gnash at me the spiked end of my warstaff travels upward and into its mouth. I feel the shudder as my weapon punches through the back of the creature's skull and lodges there. Its claw quivers and goes limp inside me.

Needing this abhorrent thing off and away from me, I grab my staff with both paws and push and lift against this now dead weight. I feel the claw slip from me. There is some little resistance as the inner sinews tear, a loud pop of the spine cracking and the head pulls away from the body with ease. My face is drenched with carrion blood. Not first blood, but last blood is sometimes just as sweet.

I flick my staff and the creature's skull falls away. I turn my attention to the hounds, both animals in a desperate struggle with this fiend. The bladed arm hangs loose at its side. The jaws of a hound are not to be taken lightly. But it has gained its feet and with a slashing claw, now prods at each animal with lightning speed. I move to join the clash, but before I can close the distance the carrion commits. It lunges forth for a

hound. The hound skirts away and that is all the chance the other needs. It leaps up onto the back of the carrion and bites down. The hound takes the entire head of the carrion into its mouth before gracelessly flipping over and pulling the monster over it and onto the ground. The first hound, now seeing the opening, bounds forward, takes the limp, bladed arm into its jaws and pulls it off. They both tear into the carcass, pawing for some soft flesh or bones to crunch on.

I turn my attention back to the Master. He appears calm, his onyx colored robes flowing behind him. The rising moon throwing its pale light onto his face looks almost unnatural. It is strange to see this adept of light illuminated by anything but that of his own making. It betrays him and I see his cracked, grey flesh. At this moment he is no Master. Just another being, flesh and bone, that can be killed out here in the wastes.

The tricksters crouch to his fore. Their small hooked blades are in their hands, they stand on their heels. Had this fight have gone sour, they'd have run.

"I see when the dogs are occupied, they are replaced with something lesser," I jibe.

"Weeee.would liiiiiive.and fight ooooooon." The reptilian head glistening in the glow of the Master.

"Luke yhou! Bluh-ded agen. Su soon yhou ruin work of bleh-sed sha-man!"



“Kraaaaaaaaak.the woooooooooounded.”

“I bleed and we are victorious. You tremble like cravens.” But as I say the words my chest heaves with pain. The shaman’s poultice must have done more than I thought as I feel spikes of chilling pain shoot all through me. My leg gives way and I collapse, retching on the ground. The fringe of my vision darkens, threatening to take my pride from me again. I focus on the pain, the sharpness of it. It keeps me here long enough to hear the Master speak.

“Screamer, you cannot continue like this.”

The Master knows nothing of being a brute. He knows only the life of a Prime, the life of those-who-know-and-consider. I make my arms fumble out for my staff and find it right beside me. “I have fallen many times before. I will fall again.” The pain is intense as I grip the staff and pull myself up to my knee. “But if I yet live, I shall rise.” As I spring up to get my hoof under me my hand slips down my blood caked staff and I crumple awkwardly landing hard on my shoulder and thorns of pain shoot up into my face. I retch again, this time vomiting a hin and runny bile onto the clay.

“If you yet live it will be because a shaman has saved you, Screamer.”

I snort and spit to clear the vomit from my nose and mouth. “The bloodsmith.” to speak feels like a fog, “has seen me enough.” Again I roll over and crouch up onto my knee. Looking down to my chest I see there is much of the carrion’s blue gore lingering in my open wound.

“When this day is won.” I fumble for my staff again but it is farther off now and I must reach for it.

“I will seek the healer, not before.”

“You maaaaaaaay not yet liiiiiiiiiiiiive.” I lift my eyes to see the reptilian trickster pointing up the small mound in the distance. They move fast, right toward us. Nine of the smaller carrion with the moonlight glinting off their bladed arms, mouths agape in their otherwise faceless heads.

“They’s too-oo manee,” the trickster hisses, “we must flie-ee!” Spoken like a trickster.

“There is nowhere to fly to, cultist.” The Master’s voice again a commandment of resolution. “We fight.”

As if his words themselves could lift me off the ground I find myself standing. “If we yet fight, we shall prevail.”

The carrion close the distance to us. As the onslaught advances down the draw in the land I can hear their ragged breath. They hunger. They mean to eat us. Once again it is combat to the death. And I scream for joy.

### Verse 3

*Blood spills thick*

*Red as brick*

*To the Khyber I am thrust*

The Carrion break into a full run, leaving their staggering behemoth to trundle on behind.

It totters unsteadily and wanders off without its escort. The tricksters stand two or three paces in front of the Master, shifting their weight back and forth. Even with the power of a Prime they are weak in spirit. I am unsteady on my hoof, but at least I stand.

The Master's lesser arms weave back and forth - some arcane ciphers known only to his caste. "Wait for my sign that the tear is closed."

The bat-faced trickster looks back with what can only be confusion on its face. "Waa-za SINE? Wazza terrrrr?" But the Master doesn't answer. He murmurs dully and if he speaks to someone or something I cannot see it, and I am happy to think it is only to himself.

The Carrion rush down the slope and a dark spike rips silently from the Master's hands. It strikes directly in front of the charging creatures and severs reality into a fissure of blackness. Two of the Carrion immediately fall into the crack and out of our existence. I do not know to where that portal leads, and I do not wish to know.

At this, one of the hounds breaks forward in a hysteric lope to join the melee. The Master, who has been intoning in his own song and

weaving an enchantment of the elements, suddenly breaks off. I hear him whisper, “no...” All his arms shoot out in a wide “X” shape and there is a blinding blast of yellow light. My hand flies up to shield my eyes and I just see the hound sucked into the withering portal.

A moment later we see that the soundless blast appears to have no effect on the advancing carrion. Undaunted by the loss of their number, all four surge forth. The tricksters both shoot their heads back, their eyes pleading with the Master for guidance, the reptilian weakly holding the chain of the hound. “Now, you clods!” and that is all the notice I need.

It is times like this that I curse myself for not being faster. I can amble with my warstaff but I cannot keep pace with a charge. The hound bolts at the lead carrion and hurdles into the air. The bladed arms come up and catch the dog in a terrible embrace of entrails and gore.

Both the tricksters lunge forward with their blades. As the body of the hound drops the reptilian cultist delivers a savage hammer-blow and digs his twisted blade into the side of the carrion’s neck. First blood.

The bat-faced trickster nimbly shoots past to engage another of the creatures. The cultist slashes wildly with his blade but he is no match for the carrion’s talons. With a squeal his arm comes off at the elbow and the cultist collapses.

I stagger forward, fast as I can but still so slow, in support of the Master, who races by me and up to where the reptile is now facing down two of the beasts. The trickster has no taste for combat and hacks wildly,

stumbling away backwards and barking hoarsely as the carrion close in. Before either the Master or I can intervene one monster strikes true and catches our cultist on the shoulder. The trickster grunts low and drops the twisted blade to cradle her wound. The other carrion drives in and opens the trickster's throat with a red splat. Second blood.

The Master leaps toward first of the carrion with surprising grace. One does not often see a Master in a hand-to-hand contest, so it is easy to forget how devastating they can be up close. His great-arms grapple the creature's bladed limbs, forcing them up and keeping him from danger. His dark, lesser-arms stab viciously into the creature's torso over and over with lightning quickness and the carrion's head nods slowly down, as if it would sleep.

I fumble forward as fast as I can. I cry out a warning to the Master but it is too late. The second abomination is on him. The blade pierces his skull effortlessly. In an instant, another of our lights goes out.

Three to one. And I am barely half of myself. I cannot hope to survive. The carrion start to circle me. I let fall my staff. I have only one thing left to do. And my voice shall tear a hole in the world.



I see myself far below. I see the carrion surround me in the wastes. They start to close in.

Suddenly they are stopped in their tracks. I am screaming. I see it in the air from above.

And I feel it in me from below. Never have I been in two places at once like this before.

The sound is colossal. It is aware. It would crush planets. It would slay the stars. It would be all that there is.

The carrion are stunned. But only for a moment. And now they close in. I watch from above and below as the first beast tears into my arm with its ugly chops. Up close it is even more disgusting. A foul mix of working parts, like one of the human's toys, make up its armor. If you can call it's fetid exoskeleton armor. Pushing forth from under these perverse pieces is an oozing grey-green flesh, that seems to pulse and move within itself.

And spattered across it's head and body is the blood of my brothers. And now me.

The second monster pushes it's blades into my eyes and I am blind. I watch from above as the third tears the bandage from my chest and begins to feed. But still I scream.

I see my scream carry out into the darkness of the wastes. I see my brothers hear me and the blood-fever rises in them. I feel all of our power at once in my will. We are unstoppable. My brothers lash out against the carrion. Our brutes crush them with staff and ax. The Masters with the terrible authority of the elements. Even the tricksters surge forth and I can see...we are winning.

And now I can let go. The worlds I have fought on begin to fade away. I can no longer hear my brothers, but I can feel them. Their rage, their power, their will. I feel the blood-fever of the primes and the power of the tricksters. We shall prevail.

The blackness takes hold now and I see nothing. Krak the Screamer begins to fade away.

It is not cold here, as I thought it would be. It is calm and still. Except for a low buzzing at the edge of my senses. And now I know.

I hear the Khyber calling. And I shall answer







## THAT BALD SCOUNDREL



„Fuck off!” The words spoken by a bald, bull-necked guy sounded more like a statement than a suggestion. In response to such rudeness the other man left his plate, still full, and walked away towards the inn’s bar. The scoundrel took the warmed-up seat, and without another look he lifted a chicken leg to his mouth. He sank his teeth into the meat, but before he could tear it off the bone, something hit him in the head. Three big-armed pals of Mr. “That-was-my-chicken-leg” just sent him their disregards with a rusty bench.

He woke up in deep shit. Literally. They had thrown him into a gutter. Officially Eld-Hain has had a sewage system for twenty years now. But in some quarters people still poured all their filth into ditches stretching along almost equally dirty streets, just like in the old times.

Not that Baldie didn’t like the Honky-Tonk. He knew all the cool guys, and they knew him. When a stranger turned up, it was an opportunity to seize. This time it didn’t work out. Now his head was swollen, the pain reached the roots of his teeth. Maybe next time? The bad people who did this to him would pay for it. He cleaned himself up a bit with water from a public water tap, heated with crystal energy. Well,

he had friends too! As his lonely hunt had failed, he decided to ask the Pack for help.

He met them in the workshop. Arne was sharpening his sword, and Yarmo was counting bolts for his repeating crossbow.

“Howdy, Pack!” Baldie greeted them.

“Hello,” they answered in unison.

“What’s crackin’?”

“We have a job outside tonight”.

“Outside the walls? Are you fucking insane?”

“They say brother Yarmo is good at such raids,” Arne said.

Yarmo only nodded his head.

“Well, that changes things.”



They waited, hidden in a crumbling, roofless house with only two walls left, on a low hill. Perhaps the building had been hit by some missile from the skies during a meteor shower? Baldie hadn’t been born then, but nagging thoughts of the apocalypse hit his slick skull like that bar bench had done earlier.

Arne’s nudge and his quiet hiss: “They’re coming,” snapped Baldie out of these heavy musings. He clutched the handle of a butcher’s axe with his fingers. He “borrowed” the weapon a few hours earlier from the butcher’s.

In the last days refugees kept coming to Eld-Hain. After the cataclysm people had gathered around the refuge. Supposedly all of them.

But as it turned out, some small groups still lived outside the walls, which were the warranty of safety, and only the appearance of demons forced the independent ones to diametrically change their lifestyle.

This group consisted of several sullen men and women, some haggard old fellows, and a bunch of kids. They were pulling two-wheeled carts, and carrying metal baskets. They fled with all their belongings, which did not go unnoticed by the Pack from Honky-Tonk.

„Toll!” Yorven, Yarmo’s brother, shouted.

A dozen of thugs, including Baldie, blocked the refugees’ way.

“Mercy!” a white-haired man begged. “There are demons from hell,” he said and pointed behind him.

“And here’s us,” Baldie joined the exchange. “You think with us you’ll have it easier? Give us all you’ve got, you old coot!”

Three male refugees carried axes, but they decided not to use them in an uneven fight. They parted with their possessions, which the bandits unceremoniously threw on the ground and kicked around, searching for valuables. There were clothes and blankets made of nettle yarn. Packed food. Copper chains and clay figurines: relics of some religion older than the One’s cult.

“Bloody heretics,” Arne grumbled, spinning his sword in the air. “Hey, you! Where are the crystals?”

“I heard that they swallow them sometimes,” Yarmo suggested.

„This is ridiculous! Our stomachs would boil,” one of the female fugitives protested.

“Best if we make sure!” Arne sheathed his sword and approached the woman with his long knife.

“Scum...” They heard a booming voice, out of nowhere. A moment later there came a swish of bowstrings, and precisely-aimed bolts knocked over half of Yorven’s gang. Baldie jumped to the protesting woman and put the axe to her throat. First he wanted to “steal a kiss from the lady”, but he decided that she would be of more use as a pass. And he wasn’t wrong. From the same hill that the Pack had come earlier, came down the knights of the Order. They hacked the rest of the thugs, but desperation in Baldie’s eyes and the first traces of blood on his hostage’s neck stopped the soldiers from eliminating their last enemy.

„Leave her, Baldie,” the same deep voice shouted.

“Who are you? Who’s in charge here?”

“I am. Let her go, and I swear on the One that you will live. If you don’t listen to me, you’re dead.”

The voice was so charismatic that Baldie, surprised with his own reaction, obeyed.



They turned them into a penal battalion. In that motley crew of the worst human trash from Eld-Haim, the hairless enthusiast of other people’s property stood in one line with his would-be victims. They were heretics after all, so they deserved punishment too. The highest one. In the face of the forthcoming end of the world, caused by the demons’

invasion, the One's priests turned a blind eye to some misdemeanors. They offered a simple way of redemption. You just had to spill some blood. Your own, or, better yet, blood of the demons.

Baldie already knew the Holy Captain's deep voice. This time the commander ordered:

“Count off to two!”

They counted off.

“The ones will go to the mine, and the twos I am taking with me on a pilgrimage. The ones step forward!

Baldie, who was a two, jabbed the heretic in the kidney with his elbow, and stepped forward.

The captain strode over to him and said: “Save your energy, Baldie. I am keeping an eye on you. Even if you were a one, I would still take you with me.”



The equipment consisted of a pair of high-legged combat boots, and a mechanical spear. Baldie was happy. He rarely got anything for free without having to steal it. The boots were a bit tight, but he promised himself that he would break them in. They were perfect for kicking in shanks or balls. He tested them already the first day during a fight with a heretic over a ration of sausage. The spear wasn't bad either. When you pressed the lever, it growled like a dozen mad dogs. The backpack with a little steam engine powering the weapon was a bit heavy, but Baldie was a strong young man.

He didn't like to be given orders, but experience taught him to listen to the captain, like he used to listen to the chieftain of the Pack in the Honky-Tonk. After all, it's good when you don't have to think for yourself all the time.

Baldie didn't have much to do with religion before. In the Honky-Tonk everybody knew that you don't mess with priests. On the other hand not many priests would pay them a pastoral visit. Now the pilgrim-soldiers had to pray, but the hairless didn't really know how to get round to it. He knelt with the others, and corrupted the words of the technotheological litany. It did not take long. The captain came over and winked at him. Then he pointed at the heretic, who, instead of kneeling, squatted on the ground, refusing to pay a tribute to the One. Baldie nodded his head to confirm what he should do. When the commander nodded back to him, the hairless got up, stood behind the rebel, and hit him backhanded. The other man's knees gave up under him. As a reward, that evening Baldie got a heap of food in the bowl.

The troop training wasn't overly theoretical, but this time they were taken to a demonstration. They sat around a large cube, covered with grey tarp. The captain pulled the sheet away, and they all held their breaths. There was a demon sitting inside the cage. Huge as fuck, face like a real mascarón, biceps like watermelons. Baldie felt the vein on his temple getting thicker and thicker. The commander called a knight of the Order. The technopaladin, armored from head to toe, bowed before

the Holy Captain and clanged his weapon against the shield. In his huge axe there was a crystal which heated up the mixture of oils, setting the round blade in motion.

“Now you’ll see how it’s done, kids,” the captain roared. “Brother Arvignan, show them how the knights fight!”

The commander opened the door of the cage wide enough for the paladin to slip inside, and then slammed it shut with a loud clash. The demon instantly charged at the knight. The man protected himself with the shield, which he would not have been able to lift without his exoskeleton. He pushed away the beast’s paws and counterattacked. Then he released the safety catch. His axe whirred loudly, and ripped the demon’s flesh. Black blood splattered on the cage bars. The knight attacked low, cutting the demon’s knee joint. The mad beast lost its balance, but before that it pulled brother Arvignan’s pavise with such force that the shield hit the bars with a loud bang.

In response, the brother started a quick sequence of attacks. First he sank the blade in the demon’s other leg, knocking him down on his knees. Then he cut the Cross of Burgundy on the creature’s chest, and in the end he touched its head with the whirring blade. His opponent fell on the ground. There was a murmur of admiration among the watchers. Too soon. In the last desperate attack, the demon grabbed the knight’s foot with his massive claws and pulled it towards him. But brother Arvignan



did not lose his cool. Maneuvering the mechanical axe between his own legs, not without difficulty, he severed the demon's head.

He threw his pot helm on the ground, wiped the sweat off his forehead, and with joy, though a bit forced, he shouted:

“Good that the bastard wasn't armed!”

The captain just watched his recruits.



Baldie did not need more demonstrations. When his co-pilgrims fell asleep, he sneaked out of the barracks as quietly as possible, and jumped over the surrounding wall. He ran towards the station of the army railway. He knew that every morning empty trains left for Eld-Hain to come back in the evening filled with provisions and cannon fodder. His plan was to sneak into one of them and get away as far as possible from the horrors of the war.

The Honky-Tonk, like an old mouse trap, taught its children how to move like cats. There were fewer watchmen on the town's side. Baldie sneaked through smoothly, like drops of sweat on his slick skull. He saw a carriage with a door slightly ajar. A few leaps, then a quick run. He pulled himself up onto the platform, and looked around, terrified, to check if somebody might have seen him. A voice behind his back made him jump:

“Psst! Hey!”

Only very weak light of crystal-powered street lights seeped in from the outside, but he recognized the familiar features. To cut this moment of tension short, he asked:

“Are you pissing off too?”

“No.”

It was that chicken guy, from the Honky-Tonk inn. Baldie’s brain was on overdrive to put the facts together. But before he could do it, something hard suddenly disrupted his thought process.



„Thank you”, the lieutenant said curtly and shook hands with...

*...fucking gendarme, I could have twisted his neck when I'd first met him...*

Baldie thought. That moment of reflection didn't last long, as the gendarme-lieutenant left the commander's office, and Holy Captain turned to his subordinate:

“You let me down, my boy. I thought you had more courage.”

“It wasn't you who got into that cage”.

“No, why should I? It was for you, I know very well what they look like. And you, what do you prefer: the demons to kill you in a fight, or to get you while you are running away with your tail between your legs?”

The pilgrim thought about it.

Meanwhile the commander put a wide glove made of little steel rings, incrustated with blue crystals, on his left hand. It resembled the protectors used by butchers in Honky-Tonk's shops when they chopped bone-in pork.

“It takes you long to think, Baldie. I’ll help you. See this map?”

The captain pointed at a huge sheet of paper hanging on the wall, meanwhile fumbling with his glove. His soldier touched a cluster of red squares around Eld-Hain.

“It’s... them?”

Instead of an answer, he felt a squeeze on his skull, and heard a sound of something sizzling. The cracking noise came from his own flesh. It took him a second, maybe a second and a half, to realize that the captain’s glove was burning a mark in his skin. The pilgrim’s eyes welled up with tears. His voice cracked when he groaned:

“Fuck... Sir, what have you done?”

“I made you a soldier. And you’d better not run away from me ever again.”



The order of departure came like a thief – unexpected, just before dawn. It robbed the recruits of their breakfast, and the others of their peace of mind.

They marched in threes. Next to Baldie walked Jester and Crook. The first one had been recruited into the pilgrims for telling a joke in public about how many priests you need in order to screw a crystal into a street light (all you need is the One’s will). The other one got caught one night when he was trying to rob the Order’s warehouse. The head of the tribunal, when announcing the verdict, joked that if Crook

had wanted to join the army so badly, he should have come to the barracks at daytime. These two unlucky fellows were having a conversation which Baldie did not want to join.

„There must be a way to escape this place.” Jester’s voice betrayed strong anxiety. “All this mayhem, no peace anywhere.”

“Nothing to get excited about. Many of us feel this way,” Crook noticed. “Right, Baldie?”

When asked, Baldie just slightly nodded his head, cringing in pain. The holy mark burnt in his face would not let him forget about its presence.

They set up camp at the foot of a watchtower. When the invasion had started, Eld-Hain was surrounded with a ring of additional fortifications.

“Where’s the food?” Baldie groaned.

“I guess we have to wait a bit more,” Crook drawled.

“I don’t wanna fucking wait, I wanna eat something. They kicked us out of the barracks without breakfast. I’m not some fucking construct to go around on a fucking steam cloud.”

His comrades suddenly paled, but Baldie didn’t notice it. He was just about to add where the commanders can shove their fucking constructs, when he heard an unpleasant hiss of the troop sergeant behind his back:

“Perfect, exactly the kind of volunteers I needed.”



The sergeant, like a good commander would, led his „volunteers” himself. There were five crossbowmen and a dozen of pilgrims in the troop, including Baldie and the heretic. The sun was past the zenith when they left in search of the quartermaster’s wagons, which did not reach the agreed place at the agreed time. They moved in line through the wasteland along the road. They walked towards the next slender tower, another link in the fortifications. The sergeant took out a crystal lamp and sent a few streaks of blue light towards the watchtower’s crew. The signal remained unanswered.

They entered a thicket of dwarf fig trees. During the cataclysm the trees had changed. Since then they bore bright green fruits, juicy with poison. Their bitterish smell filled the air. From the tree branches there came the hooting of owls. They used to be night birds, but something made them start seeking food at daytime too. Suddenly the men saw red smoke which surrounded them with a new scent. Sweetish but acrid. It carried strange fear. The sergeant held up his hand to halt the troop. He wiped the sweat off his face and ordered:

“Let’s get back to the camp. Nothing we can do here... We need more soldiers.”

The men instinctively shook their heads.

They started to withdraw when they heard unfamiliar barking. They didn’t know what animal could make such a sound. After a while there

came a stomp of muscular paws, and then they saw a small pack of hellhounds. The hyena-like beasts ran straight at them with their mouths open, showing yellowed fangs. The instinct of survival turned out to be stronger than narcotic fear. The soldiers formed a small phalanx. The first row kneeled down, the crossbowmen gathered in the second line and shot at the hounds on the sergeant's mark. A few beasts fell in their run and tumbled on the ground.

“Crossbows, shoot! Spears, hold,” the commander shouted.

They could already see single fangs in the predators' mouths. Drops of goeey saliva splashed around with blueish tongues, reached the first row...

“Spears on!”

The hellhounds tried to split at the last moment and flank the human formation, but the noise of huge metal arrowheads freaked them out and disturbed their hunting sense. Black blood splattered on the pilgrims, the bowstrings of their repeating crossbows groaned. The whirr of the spears mixed with the zing of the creatures being slaughtered. The men held their formation and massacred the beasts. The remaining animals fled with their tails between their legs. At the edge of the grove the soldiers saw stooped silhouettes in scarlet hooded coats: the cultists of dread from the Caste of Terror. They were swinging chains with bone censers. Red fumes were coming out of them. The hooded men threatened the fleeing hounds with the blades of their yataghans.

“Through the middle, crossbowmen! Ready to fire! Pilgrims to the flanks! Attack,” the sergeant shouted.

The beasts’ blood washed away the fear. The men, uplifted by their first success, charged at their enemies. A few scarlet cultists fell under the Order’s shooters’ bolts. The running pilgrims already saw their hideous faces: a disgusting mix of hogs, bats, and oversized rodents.

The demons hurled the censers at the people. The missiles fell on the ground with a dangerous sounding hiss, but they did not explode. The red cultists fled towards the watchtower. They moved their hooves with dizzying speed, the furious men just behind them. The crossbowmen stopped shooting, so as not to hurt their comrades.

The mortals of both races joined in the chase and kept running until they reached the lost wagons with provisions. Baldie saw one of his comrades run just behind a cultist, the arrowhead of his spear about to tear his hood...

“Oh fuck!” The hairless pilgrim grabbed the shaft of the cart so he wouldn’t fall. The soldier, whom he followed with his eyes, shot upwards like a kicked ball. From behind the wagon came out the same monster that he saw at the demonstration. This time it had massive armor and a humongous two-handed mace. And some buddies. The soldiers had no time to create a formation, when an uneven fight broke out. Ten huge, heavy-armed demons charged at the pilgrims whose only weapons were their steam spears.

“Hey, heresy!” Baldie shouted to the heretic. “Together! From both sides!”

With a growl of the spears they started to circle the demon. Suddenly the hairless dived under the wagon.

“Hey! Where...!?” the heretic shouted before his skull broke like a cherry hit by a mortar’s masher. The demon turned around, looking for the other opponent. It heard a sudden sharp noise but didn’t see the arrowhead. The blow came low, under the armor, ripping the creature’s knees. Remembering the demonstration, Baldie thrust his spear in the demon’s throat and pulled it out only when the head turned into a formless mass. Then he leaped again under the wagon.

The situation on the battlefield didn’t look good.

Baldie saw the mutilated body of the sergeant, a few little groups defending themselves, each on its own, and the demons walking around the battlefield like warlords. He saw only two cadavers of the hell creatures. He decided it was high time to decamp.

Unfortunately the hellhounds joined the fight again. He knew he wouldn’t be able to get away from them. His only chance was the tower. He saw an open door. He had no idea what had happened to the crew, but he felt it was his only opportunity.

He kept running, not looking back, until he found himself in a room on the ground floor of the building.



Inside he saw five cultists of dread in their red coats, sitting on the corpses of the human watchmen. They were gesturing animatedly over a map of the Eld-Hain area. Without much thinking, Baldie turned on his spear and cut off the head of the cultist closest to him. The others stood up, screaming, and took out their yataghans. Having the advantage of a longer weapon, Baldie managed to kill another two. From the remaining pair one ran up the stairs to the upper floors, and the other deftly slipped under the spear to thrust the blade into the chest of the Honky-Tonk's son. With a skilled move, the branded pilgrim hit the place where a human male would have testicles with his knee. The demon groaned with pain, and the soldier took a step back and thrust his spear in the creature's underbelly.

Baldie slammed the door shut. He noticed that it was broken after the demons' attack. Huffing with effort, he barricaded it with a heavy table. He folded the enemy's map, and put it into the pocket of his trousers. He put the spear away, too long for indoor fighting. He picked up a yataghan lying by the demons' corpses, and swung it in the air. Then he noticed a sword which belonged to a knight of the Order, picked it up, and threw away the hell blade. He was walking up the stairs when he saw a steam axe hanging on the wall. Just like the one the paladin used to kill the monster in the cage. On the huge axe there was an engraving, the name of the previous owner. Well, brother Zed didn't need

it anymore. The pilgrim changed his weapon for the last time and ran after the fifth demon.

The room was lit only with the light coming through narrow loopholes. It was quite dark inside. Baldie couldn't see his opponent but he heard the smacking sounds. Clapping. Scratching. Then loud huffing. He was surprised to see a huge cephalopod with five pairs of purple eyes, three forked tongues in its mouth, and a dozen of armored tentacles. The frightened pilgrim screamed, turned on the axe blade, and hurled the weapon at the center of the monster. In the place where the creature just stood, a cultist in a scarlet coat fell, with the axe thrust deep into his chest.

The pilgrim ran onto the observation platform of the watchtower, and looked at the battlefield. Jester and Crook were defending themselves on the platform of the provisions wagon. Wine was streaming out of a punctured barrel. Baldie grabbed a signal lamp, and turned it towards the Holy Captain's camp. He hesitated. Nobody taught him the light alphabet. Luckily there was a manual next to the lamp. The pilgrim started reading it, but the letters were slipping away from him like slimy worms. Baldie cursed the day when the teacher grabbed him by his neck and threw out of the school to a gutter. Luckily there were pictures on most of the pages. Although some secrets of the art of reading remained obscure to him, he managed to decipher a simple soldier-like instruction.

He called for reinforcements.



The wind howled over the tower. Baldie saw two riders coming from the camp: Holy Captain and an ensign with the One's banner, and behind them the rest of the column of the Order's cavalry. Next to them were running steam golems, the armored fists of the technological god.

On the horizon, behind the lonely soldier's back, the barren land was reddening with banners and war signs. It was an army of demons approaching Eld-Hain.



They saved him. Took him to the camp. Fed him and gave him a bottle, for courage.

Baldie opened the bottle of moonshine with his teeth. He lifted the glass, ready to suck the longed-for liquid straight from the bottle, just like he sucked warm milk from his mother's breast as a bald baby. His mother weaned him a bit too early. Unfortunately, this time it happened again. Holy Captain held the bottle in the air with his iron hold, and Baldie only managed to comment it with a painful:

“Fuck, this was my vodka!”

The commander slapped him in the head.

„You gotta remain sober, Baldie. Your crusade is not finished yet.”

Then the captain laughed cordially and said:

“I told you that you won’t die. You got the enemy’s map, and I appoint you the new sergeant. You have to tell the regiment’s writer your real name. I won’t call you after your bald skull forever either.”

Baldie frowned. He hadn’t heard his real name for so long. Only his father said it out loud, and his father has been dead for such a long time. His real name...

They kneeled to pray before their next departure. The scoundrel’s lips were repeating words of the technotheological litany more and more skillfully. From the earth dirt, from the combat boots which didn’t pinch him anymore, through his scraped knees, he felt a chill of enlightenment going towards the top of his egg-smooth head.

The lieutenant-gendarme was watching the new sergeant with unusual suspicion.

But Baldie didn’t see it. He was looking at his new god. The Holy Captain adjusted his officer belt.



## APOCRYPHON



A young acolyte treaded carefully between faces drawn on the sand. Pearls of sweat shone on his forehead. He had heard the story about the fury which flooded a nameless old man when the Order's censor stepped on one of the visages, but only when he saw the corpse did he finally believe it.

Nearby, there was a cripple sitting on a stone, his eyes burnt out with madness. He had primitive grabs fixed to the stumps of his forearms, which were holding a stick, and not without difficulty. The eremite seemed to be fully focused on cautiously moving the stick. Drawing a mouth, its corner raised in a slight half-smile, requires precision – it is so easy to ruin the picture with one careless move when you don't have a hand.

The acolyte raised his head and sighed quietly. So close... And the labyrinth of faces. Thousands of visages of a woman as nameless as the lonely madman. Was the path to the truth always bristling with such intricate traps?

*Then he saw the woman whom the One made the embodiment of harmony. Her face perfectly regular, like the best cast of the Great Furnaces of*

*Völklingen Masters, the whole wisdom of Al-Iskandariya in her eyes, the sweetness of Verreden granaries in her voice.*

The Testimony of the Nameless Pilgrim

ONCE THE RAILWAY POST EIGHT-THREE, A CARGO HANDLING SPOT, THE LAST OUTPOST OF THE ORDER'S KNIGHTS AND THE PILGRIMS ON THE WAY TO ELD-HAIN.

“So this is *Arrowhead*?” the woman asked, looking around the engine shed.

“It sure is!” A young mechanic, standing on the service ramp going over the wheels along the steel bulk, turned his head. “Who’s asking?”

“Well, it looks quite shabby for such a famous machine.” The woman assessed the vehicle critically. The locomotive did look beaten-up: its body marked with scars of dents, the chipped lights.

The stranger wrinkled her nose. She did it in a cute way, the young guy decided.

“A strong bullgine, solid, toughest in its class! Those scratches are nothing!” The mechanic straightened up proudly. “Besides, lots of different things crawl onto the machines in the wilderness, something always gets dented,” he added, watching the woman. Unfortunately, she did not look like someone to be impressed by a dangerous life of a giant steam engine crew member. Pity... Such a pretty face, regular features, sharp eyes – oh, how he wanted to take her into the cab.

“Well, and what are these modifications?” The woman pointed her finger at the cover of a steam generator and the net of bent wires entwining the hull like a spider web. The young man immediately got suspicious. Stealing inventions, although officially banned by the Order, was common outside the Refuges. Every improvement could give the steam engine crew an advantage over their competitors, especially with getting difficult, yet profitable jobs.

“Our engine, our business. Who did you come to see and what for?” he snapped.

The woman smiled slightly, and the lad for a moment felt that for that smile he could be cut into pieces.

“Is the driver here?” she asked, undeterred.

“Maybe he is, maybe he isn’t.”

“I’ll wait then.”

The lad shrugged his shoulders and resumed the inspection. The three-crystal *Arrowhead* was standing on a sidetrack, together with other steam engines waiting for the agreed cargo. Those with carriages attached were being prepared for departure. Out of the eight tracks to Eld-Hain only three were passable, but still the course usually required forcible breaking of the barriers put up by demonic scouts. The crews of the locomotives going in that direction were just having a briefing with the stationmasters and the Order’s knights, and they were arguing over granting them the Order’s escort.



The girl squatted down. The mechanic looked at her now and again furtively, racking his head who she might be. He continued his thorough check-up, despite his growing curiosity, because he knew that the Elder could punish him severely for messing up.

The meeting finally ended. The drivers and track maintainers left to their machines. Some red with anger, some smiling, others sorrowful. Just like Old Ahab. The main driver of *Arrowhead*, deep in his thoughts, wasn't walking alone. He was accompanied by a portly priest of the One and two grim thugs. When all four of them approached the locomotive, the priest nodded his head at the woman, as if he had expected to see her here, and she got up, greeting him with a wave of her hand.

“Manny!” Ahab shouted. “Weor are me railway lads? Oot ta git mortal?”

“Nah,” the mechanic grunted from the ramp. “They went to the telegraphist to find out when our carriages will be pulled here. Up until now only a part of the train announced themselves from the railway post eighty.”

“Haad yer pash, tracks an' sleepers winnet run awa, neeo wuh hev a mare important job. Find them an' git the train ready fo' the neet.”

The young man looked around the group and frowned.

“What do you mean? We were supposed to get through to the broken track, and unload the materials for fixing it. What can be more important

than a working track to a Refuge under siege? Those two thugs are our crew?”

“No talking back, just do it. The Order’s business,” one of the ruffians answered calmly, although a threat lurked in his raspy voice.

“Me train, me fowk, they can syah what they want. Heor is ne monastery, ah winnit punish for truth or questions.” Ahab gave the man a hard look.

“Easy.” The monk raised his hands in a gesture of reconciliation. “Your engine, your rules, Ahab, but the job is urgent and important. We’ll attach one carriage, then the gentlemen here and the archivist get in.” The mechanic groaned in his mind. Such a pretty girl, and already plighted to the One. “You will leave after dark, in the direction of Eld-Hain. Sir Jaeger will give you all the details. Brother Usama Ibn Munkiz,” he nodded at a grim giant with a scarred face, “leads the expedition in the name of the Order. As I already said, you will come back in a day or two, the latest. You cannot say a word about anything you see or hear. Anything, Ahab. Make sure your crew remembers that. I won’t make you swear on the One, as you do have your reputation, but this is a matter of life and death. Is that clear?”

The Elder nodded his head hesitantly. Now the priest turned to Usama.

“We’ll meet as agreed, brother. We’ll get there on horseback, probably by the evening. Join us. Whoever gets there first, waits for the others. If two days later--”

The ruffian put his heavy hand on the One's servant's shoulder, cutting him off midword:

"It's ok. We know what to do. I will come to an understanding with those Völklingenians. Take care!"

*They left into darkness, lifeless nothingness between the refuges, the space torn with craters left after the Apocalypse. Their only protection were the boards of the steel monster, Arrowhead, the cleverness and grace of the One. Their only adversary was the whole night world, full of unspoken evil, the filth of the Wilderness, and their own secret sins."*

#### The Testimony of the Nameless Pilgrim

They drove through the night. The pistons beat rhythmically, the wheels rumbled on the tracks. *Arrowhead* moved very slowly, so its lights flickered weakly, hardly dispersing the darkness.

Ahab leaned over the clocks, the helpers stayed by the valves, the mechanic by the generator's levers. And she – she was on the service ramp, in her goggles, so the wind wouldn't dry her eyes, staring into space. She was a bait. And they were on a hunt for an Insatiable.

The mechanic looked at the archivist now and again. He liked her more and more. Before they left, they had talked a bit. She expertly recognized further modifications, appreciated the solutions, understood how they worked. She also asked about the metal net entwining *Arrowhead's* body. The lad described the generator producing lightning power, conducted to the lamps and bare wires on the locomotive's hull.

“Once a monstrous birdbeak tried to reach the cab through the ramp. When the train turned, it grabbed a wire, and hooked its knife over another wire so it wouldn’t fall off. It just fried itself. It stank terribly, its guts spilled through all its holes. But I gotta say, we were speeding with the controls in the red zone, and the lights were bright like it was daylight. We had to cut that thing off the net.”

She nodded her head, as if pleased.

“I’m gonna need to switch this power over to the carriage. Short circuit. Can you do it?” she asked.

Sure he could. For the appreciation in her eyes, for the murmur of approval, he could redesign the whole world. Her beauty itself pleased the eye, not to mention her clever mind. The monastic dress couldn’t hide her shapely figure, and she had fire in her eyes given only to deep believers or... to the knowing ones. The lad had already seen it: in the eyes of the master engineers of the foundry, and of a senior foreman in the workshop with arms covered with burns and scars, and finally once during the equinox holiday in the eyes of the Völklingen Clockmaker. He saw this flame in Ahab’s eyes, too, already a year ago. That’s why he joined his command, despite the lower pay. He felt that in the mech-team he would learn more than anywhere else.

The mechanic and the archivist worked together for the whole afternoon. It was evident that such work was nothing new to her. He secretly admired how skillfully she connected cables and distinguished

or guessed what purpose a given circuit served. After she had prepared the connection, the woman entered the carriage with a bunch of wires in her hands, leaving the door ajar. The lad hesitated, then he came closer. The secret hidden inside tempted him, almost summoned him through the gap. Finally, unable to contain his curiosity, he looked inside. He saw a stack of semi-transparent boxes with steam crystals inside: smaller, bigger, sometimes several in one container. All of them entwined with wires. They must have been immersed in some liquid, as they drifted in something seemingly thicker than water, something which would not steam.

Suddenly a strong hand gripped the handle. The door shook violently, and the mechanic instinctively jumped aside. A grim giant, who must have sneaked in quietly and now stood just next to the lad, frowned and said in a quiet raspy voice:

“Don’t stick your nose in someone else’s business, boy. Someone could trap it, not on purpose, but it could hurt a lot. Believe me, it’s better this way. For everyone.”

The young man looked at Usama defiantly, but he met only a blank stare from the Order’s knight. The foremen told the truth, a man felt a chill in his soul when one of the One’s slayers looked at him. Together we are machinery, they would say. They are a hammer, steel terror, and we are their gears, their engine. They will come when a demon destroys a breastplate or a key mechanism, the wise men reeking of grease used

to say, and you, taking the broken steampanz, will look into their blank eyes, sigh heavily, and do your job without a word. You will do it, they explained, because it is them who get killed by fangs or bloody magic, so we can survive another sunny day, drink one more beer, and grab another lass, before we all kick the bucket. Perhaps there is no God, it doesn't matter anyway, but we, together with them, are a clock ticking down the last hours of our world. It would be a sin to break its mechanism!

The Völklingen foremen told the truth. The mechanic lowered his eyes, muttered an apology, turned around, and went to the steam engine.

Ibn Munkiz and silent Jaeger disappeared in the carriage for a longer time. When a quiet, always watchful thug opened the door, they saw that he was wearing steam armour. The archivist raised her thumb, and then Jaeger informed the team about the purpose of their expedition. The helpers cursed quietly and the lad muttered the words of a prayer. Only Ahab smiled like a predator.

“First you restrain the anathema. If this plan doesn't work, Usama and I step in. Then the Order's lady does her job. Gentlemen, don't be fooled by her maiden look. Her mind is sharper than many swords. Are your steam crystals christened?

“The worst cocksman in the monastery christened the bullgine,” the Elder jibed. The knight shook his head but did not dwell on the subject.

They were driving for a second mass, waiting for an attack. Their plan was simple: lure the thing onto the wires, hide inside the cab, and at the same time speed up and fry the monster.

The archivist returned to the cab. She stepped inside and huffed angrily.

“We won’t catch anything this way. This train of yours is too big, it scares them away! Who saw a steam engine twenty feet long? You, railway men, and your steel extension of your willies. *Pequod* was smaller.”

Ahab jumped as if stabbed, tore away from the gauges, and turned to the archivist. Eyes gleamed in the dark.

“Wasn’t small, all hundred feet! And even that wasn’t enough,” he growled.

The woman lowered her head. Only the rattle of the wheels broke the silence.

“I’m sorry.” Her words almost disappeared in the noise. “Let’s stop. I will go out as decoy. How far is it to the switch where we are supposed to get on the return track?”

“Half a mile,” Ahab answered through his teeth. “Halt!”

The brakes screeched.

*The Insatiable, a creature without the One’s grace, composed of flesh, machine, and a crystal imprisoning a thinking self. He jumped over to the train and scrambled up the plates. Six legs of flesh and steel, tendons inter-*

*twined with metal cords, muscles connected with cogwheels, bones tailed with metal bars, clang against the Arrowhead's armour. Ahab shouted, ordering to drown the father and grandfather. The assistants opened the pump valves. Streams of water gushed onto the crystals and immediately turned them into hot steam. The pistons jerked, nearly ripping the train out of its place. The abominable creature almost reached the cab and Ibn Munkiz in his steampanz was about to stand on the roof, risking death of conduction himself, just to delay the curse and buy the crew some time when the lamps suddenly shone with blinding light, and lightning danced on the net. Ahab caught the Insatiable, in a fountain of sparks and to a groan of metal, melted by artificial thunderbolts.*

#### The Testimony of the Nameless Pilgrim

They slowed down only after some time. The mechanic broke the circuit, and Ibn Munkiz and Jaeger, both in steam armour, left the cab and stood on the ramps.

“We have to hurry, before this scum starts to reconstruct the mechanisms and seeks new victims. If it lifts even one leg, don't look back at us. Turn on the sparkles. I don't want it to devour my soul, I don't want to become a part of this... thing.” Usama's order left no doubt: they were taking death into account. Despite that, or perhaps because of it, Ahab crossed them with a sign of a cogwheel. It was the first time when the lad saw the Elder bless anyone with a forbidden symbol. Ibn Munkiz turned his head towards the driver, threatened him with his steel finger, but did not say anything.



They watched the Holy Knights arduously cut the melted armour of the Insatiable, throw an elastic wire net on the crystal menacingly pulsating inside the construct, and pull it out. They quickly took the mineral to the carriage, and the archivist connected the cables with a short circuit.

“On my mark, turn it on. And don’t touch the lever until we stop. This is the only way we’ll manage to get to our station,” she said.

The lad nodded his head and grabbed the switch.

“I wanted to ask you for a favor. Talk to me. I have to see to this contraption regularly, and I don’t want to fall asleep.”

So they talked the whole night. Whispering, often leaning towards each other, while Ahab would throw them hostile looks now and again. A mechteam builds, breaths, works – together. You shouldn’t get distracted and maybe some can be hot-blooded – but on a train blood means grease, oil. The lad seemed not to notice disapproval in the Elder’s eyes. The rattle of the wheels on the tracks played a rhythm for the conversation which quickly turned from an initially casual talk to a wary dance of words, discrete smiles, and seemingly unintended allusions. The young man felt that each passing mile brought him closer to the archivist too.

*Meteors, apart from the doom, brought minerals capable of turning every liquid into steam, or, as it turned out later, of catching a dying soul.*

*Nobody knows how, but they were followed by demons, craving people's death. Are the crystals then a creation of The One?*

#### The Testimony of the Nameless Pilgrim

They reached the abandoned railway post, the infamous, haunted number ninety, at dawn. Ibn Munkiz ordered them to move as slowly as possible, as long as lightning would keep running along the wire to the carriage. The knights in mechanical armour jumped off the train and ran ahead, soon taking over the hardly rolling vehicle. The mechanic watched the warriors. Despite the tiredness, his innate curiosity made itself known.

“How is it made...so small? Our generator is like a crate of beer,” he muttered, partly to himself, partly to the archivist standing beside him.

“Good design, that's the whole secret. A mixture of liquids which is an excellent heat exchanger, a very hermetic system, and with a glass of liquid you get a full month of sublimation and condensation,” she said with a poorly masked pride. “I have to go there, sorry.” She pointed at the carriage. “When the mind sleeps, demons wake up.”

The lad, surprised by hearing a familiar slogan, raised his head.

“Are you from Verreden? Were you in the insurrection? Did you sell yourself of your own accord or were you forced to do so?”

“Idiot! What do you know? Lucky bastards, it's easier to replace Verredenian peasants than Völklingenian foundry-workers.” She nar-

rowed her eyes, spitting the bitter words through her teeth. “Everyone wants to live. So long!”

“Leev it,” Ahab said quietly from his place over the clocks. “The Order’s lass hez hor secrets, bettor neet toich it.”

“Sit on your arse, or bettor git sum kip,” the driver’s helper backed him. “Wuh are simple workers, an’ she’s a class lady,” he added when the archivist left onto the ramp.

“Keep talking,” the lad thought, following the woman with his eyes.

They passed a broken gate and the hatch of the cargo shaft, now covered with sand. Next to it there was a rusting steam crane, once probably used for transporting cargo from carriages straight to the underground warehouse. There was a new makeshift crane standing beside it. A priest accompanied by Jaeger greeted them by a half-ruined platform. He blessed the *Arrowhead* and its crew.

“You have to modify the steam pump by the well to refill it with water. The main turbine of the railway post is so damaged that even our brother engineer didn’t manage to fix it. Here, in the wilderness, we have our business, to the glory of the One. No loitering by the engine room, the Order forbids,” he added. “We set out provisions in the lodge, feel free to use them as you want. The payment is waiting at the eighty three.”

“Let’s git ready wot wuh hev tuh an’ off wuh gan,” The Elder answered dryly. “Hurry up, lad, git to wark. An’ yee, Zigi, gan help him! Carriage?”

“We’re disconnecting it,” Jaeger confirmed. “Don’t look at us like that, Ahab. This place is not haunted. The Order chooses distant places so nobody meets any danger in case of...failure. Do you understand?”

“Ahm neet sum wazzock,” the driver answered rudely. “Ah winnet ax abyeut owt, me men neither.”

“Great.” The knight nodded his head.

They spent two exhausting days trying to fix the pump, but when they sealed the mechanism and flooded the crystal, the engine finally started. Without the pump they would have spent a week or more trying to bring water in buckets – the train was quite thirsty. Using an old water-cart they transported all the water they needed to the locomotive. Old Ahab ordained some rest and departure at dawn. The lad sighed quietly, worried that he won’t have a chance to say goodbye to the archivist – he saw her only twice, briefly, and he wanted to speak to her in private, if only for a moment. He was intrigued by her, and even though he knew that as she wore the Order’s robe – no matter if she did it by choice or was forced to do it – nothing would happen between them, but in those times it was possible they would never meet again. He wanted to be close to her one more time, smell her scent, feel her brief touch, see her mysterious smile when she leaned to him while telling a story in a whisper. So, when the train’s crew went to sleep, he left to find her.

He found her on a platform, sitting on a half-broken bench. She set out little steam crystals on a piece of cloth. She looked through them at the moon, which was shining brighter and brighter in the sky, and sorted them into several stacks.

“How did you know about *Pequod*?” he whispered, standing beside the woman.

She laughed softly.

“We have amazing stories in our archives. Including the one about *Pequod*, which was commanded by Ahab and derailed during the fight with Mb̄dico demon. And about the locomotive wreck, later brought to Völklingen and remodeled into *Arrowhead*, with considerable improvements. I did not choose you by chance. People talk about your travels, and the Order’s archivists write their stories down. I didn’t think Ahab would defy ageing so well. It looks like his obsession is protecting him.”

The mechanic was silent for a moment, before he spoke again:

“I know that legend. We all know it. It wasn’t him. The Elder was there, he was the only survivor. He was an assistant back then. He took his name after his father and grandfather, they were killed in the fight.”

They were quiet for a while. Then the lad spoke first:

“Back then, in the cab... I’m sorry.”

She waved her hand.

“Not your fault. Ones like me had come forward then only so the Order could put away the burning stacks. You are really lucky, even a helper by

the furnace or in the train is a qualified worker. Well, just look how you work together – like machine gears, economical movements, everyone knows without a word what he should do and when, everything is synchronized. And your folk argue with the Chapter somehow differently.”

The mechanic lowered his head, digesting the archivist’s words. She wasn’t just anyone, if she had been allowed to live; moreover, it seemed that she was one of the reasons why they had stifled the rebellion of Verreden in such a bloody way – and despite constant lack of people who would fight the demons.

“What are you? What is it that you do?”

She smiled mysteriously, picked up another crystal, and looked at it closely against the light.

“They say that when the world was dying on the Judgement Day, the One cried. Steam crystals are his tears, hot from the god’s sorrow. Some of those tears had already cooled down, and the despair closed inside them turned into a void. A void which can be filled with a soul of a thinking being. In this void a soul, if its faith is strong enough, finds the One and becomes a part of god’s machinery.”

“Wait a minute,” the lad protested. “Wasn’t that the One who sent the destruction, because people had forgotten him and turned away from technology? Aren’t the steam crystals his gift for true believers whom he saved? Are you... I mean” – he lowered his voice – “is this the Verredenian heresy? Everyone who has the right crystal has a key to finding... god?”

The archivist closed her eyes.

“Let’s say that it’s a different point of view, still unproven,” she answered after a moment, also quietly.

They kept silent. The technician wondered for a moment, then asked:

“Why do you need the crystals of Insatiables? Do you think they are those cooled tears? How can there be something which speaks with the One in a being so twisted and devilish?”

The woman opened her eyes and looked at the boy searchingly.

“Does it really speak? For some reason it seeks and literally devours bodies, engines, and souls of other creatures. As if this thing couldn’t stand being alone. Or it was looking for something. Or...”

“Or found another, very voracious god.” The lad patted his stomach, but then he became serious. “Or it hasn’t found anyone. In Völklingen some say that we have lived under a silent sky for a long time now.”

“I’m guessing that they say it in a whisper when there are no priests of the Order around?”

“Well... You know that it’s different here with us.”

“I know. And I’m not saying it’s wrong.” She looked the lad in the eyes. “Trust me, being burnt is a horrible way to die.”

“Maybe I’ll believe it,” the lad hesitated, frowning. “But if so, why did you allow so many to be burnt? And what are you doing here, actually? You, a heretic in a monastic dress?”

The archivist nodded her head, as if pondering. She was silent for a moment, before she spoke again.

“The Order still believes that the demons can be fought off, that Eld-Hain can be saved, together with its crystal mines. That those seven human Refuges, which still exist, those remnants of the world of our ancestors, can stand the invasion of this... thing, if they had already survived one destruction. But you know what? It is an illusion, you would need a miracle for that to happen! But, if it is to happen, I will be the one to do it. That should be enough for you.” She put away the object which she had held into a piece of cloth, and wrapped the crystals stack by stack. “I gotta go. Farewell!” She stood up quickly and took a few steps. The lad looked at her, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Suddenly the woman stopped and turned her head to him.

“Have a good life. We don’t have much time left,” she said over her shoulder, quietly, so quietly that he wasn’t sure if he heard her right, and then she walked away.

He was racking his brains: what did this lovely archivist really work on? Oblivious to the priest’s ban, pushed forward by unrestrained curiosity, he waited a bit, before he stealthily followed the woman. He entered the engine room, and to his surprise he saw darkness inside, dispersed only by the moonlight coming through a slightly open port. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark, and went on a search. But the only things he found were a decaying turbine, and – just next to it



– a trapdoor. When he lifted it, light poured out of the opening. It was quiet inside.

He waited for a while longer before he decided to go down to the tunnel. The brightness came from arc lamps hung along the walls. He sighted the cable – well, well, dear little monks actually produced conductivity here! – and then he carefully moved down the corridor.

He stepped as soundlessly as he could. Soon he reached something which must have once been an underground warehouse, the one whose trapdoor they passed by the entrance. The few dying lamps did not light the room fully, but what he saw shocked him.

There were huge wire nets suspended under the ceiling, looming in the dusk. Various crystals were fixed in the mesh, some smaller, others larger. Pale blue lightning jumped all over the bare metal web. Bundles of cables, thick as pillars in the One's temples, dove towards the ground to break there apart with roots of single cables and drown their ends in semitransparent crates, similar to the ones he had seen in the carriage. The whole contraption, vines of wires, entangled pipes filled with some strange liquid, and weird paths of runic symbols, came together at one point.

In the middle he saw a throne, partly metal, and partly made of numerous crystal shards. And then he saw stars.

*One who sees too much becomes an enemy – as he too clearly tells the creations of the One from the human, or even godless works.*

The Testimony of the Nameless Pilgrim

As if through a fog, he heard voices. The pain muffled everything.

“Why did you drag him in here? Should’ve croaked him quietly and buried him!” Anger and discouragement sounded in every word.

“Oh, your holiness, but this wouldn’t been right. He is a human, all right, not some demon or an Insatiable.” The voice was humble, low, used to asking.

“He broke the holy ban! Do you enter Al-Iskandariya laboratories if you are forbidden to do so?” Ice. The anger in the voice now turned into ice.

“No, father, but it’s a youngster, he’s curious.”

“Disobedience is punished with death.” Like cold steel, accidentally knocked with a wrench during a repair.

“Oh, your holiness, have mercy! Let’s take him, he is a mechanic after all. He could be useful here.”

“He’s a Völklingenian. An educated one, true, and talented, from what our sister had said, but they never bend their heads down. And that heresy of theirs, of a silent sky, pure reason, people like gears in a mechanism. Have you ever wondered, brother, why the Order puts only strangers from other Refuges there?”

“Come on, Thomas. The monk’s right.” He knew this hoarse voice, seemingly calm, yet hiding an unspoken threat. The scarred face, the finger threatening Ahab.

“I respect you, Usama, but this is my censor jurisdiction. And you, let me remind you, my brother in sword, are under it. Kill, bury, get rid of the crew, without telling anyone. Especially her!”

“No.” The raspy voice was firm.

“Are you opposing the One’s will?”

“Brother engineer, leave us alone, please. And if you say even a word to anyone, I will rip your tongue out myself. Should I repeat?”

“N-no, brother Usama.”

The door slammed. Fading steps in the hallway.

“Thomas, you don’t bring anything into this mission besides religious supervision. Kill the youngster, and you will have an accident.”

“Have you gone crazy with age? Are you threatening the deputy of Censuram?”

“It’s a promise, Thomas, not a threat. Enough with unnecessary atrocities which you commit in the name of the One.”

“You are insane.”

“There are other ways to guarantee silence. Agreed, the crew of *Arrowhead* must be sent away, the lad needs to be announced missing. I will ask Jaeger to set out the right traces before dawn. It would be a wraith, it seems, quite a common horror in this area. But I won’t agree

to a murder for the cause. I had seen enough in Verreden. Remember Verreden? Do you sleep well? What now, why are you silent?”

“The One... You saw what happened there. Clueless people prayed to crystals and worked their asses off for those... architects of the path to salvation. Fucking defeatists. Nobody believed there that they could keep fighting! Everyone prepared for imminent crystal ascension, dozens, hundreds of thousands of people led to death by this elite of hopeless parasites! The shortest path to the One, salvation, right.”

“And that’s why you ordered to burn them alive?”

“That’s why you burned them alive on my word. Breaking the unity of the Refuge means death for all the people. Think about it: almost a dozen winters have passed and we are still fighting, the demons haven’t trampled over our houses yet! If we had allowed them, in Verreden, for that senseless mass suicide, the bloody hellhounds from Eld-Hain would have bitten into our dead bodies. Usama! If it hadn’t been for you, or me, for everyone who swallowed their doubts then, believing in unity, a few million people would have already died in agony in all the Refuges! The bread you’ve got in your sack was baked with Verredenian flour!”

“Well. And now you supervise putting into practice the same theory which we kept burning away so thoroughly?”

“To all the bolts in your thick head, Usama. The Chapter made the decision because we are stuck – we, the remnants of humanity – in the

claws of the demons, tightening more and more. I don't like it, I don't believe that we will find the One where those architects dreamed we would, and this heresy must be closely watched. We have to save the people here, as they live, if by some miracle it works out. Ensure order if it fails. Who else will if not me, if not you?"

"As far as I'm concerned, order doesn't mean murdering those precious remnants of humanity without batting an eye, just for their juvenile curiosity. This is not the kind of order the priests teach about."

Silence.

"So how is it going to be, Thomas?"

"Fine. He will live. I will think of something else."

*If we believe – we believe as strongly as you do, if we pray – we pray with the same words. But we do not force anyone to do it, we do not shut the mouths of those who ask questions.*

The Testimony of the Nameless Pilgrim

Usama Ibn Munkiz looked at the space wrung out of life, churned with craters, now being swallowed by the train. He kept coming back to that conversation. He felt bitterness in his mouth again, and he cursed his own blindness. He sensed that Thomas was preparing something, but this...

A tongue ripped out, hands cut off. He won't tell, won't write. The atonement given by the censor law, for the sin of alleged heresy: a pilgrimage. Punishment for those who had nothing to lose: a suicidal

peregrination with only a chain spear against the devils besieging Eld-Hain. How could a crippled boy kill seven demons to gain absolution and freedom? How could he fix or build something ever again? Jaeger, a companion and friend, stopped the old knight from tearing apart the cruel priest, with great difficulty. They took care of the lad, saved him. But they couldn't light up the empty eyes of the convict.

Weeks passed. The friars worked with all their strength. But they were not ready yet; they still had not learned how they could take total control over the selves enclosed in crystals entwined with lightning bolt wires. If they were to reach the One through god's tears, they had to clear their path, and getting rid of the present tenants of the crystals turned out to be more difficult than they suspected. So they had to stifle them, knock them out, at least for the time of the believer's journey. But still not everything was working, the spirit in the machine was not easily tamed. Yes, the message about the army of demons marching towards Eld-Hain reached them far too early.

On the day when the train appeared, with Pilgrims travelling to Eld-Hain for death or bloody absolution of their sins, the archivist saw a boy. Poorly hammered grabs in place of hands, just to hold a mechspear, his face riddled with suffering.

"I thought he was dead," the archivist muttered, surprised, looking at the mutilated Pilgrim escorted by the Order's knights. They were crossing the yard of the railway post, in their steam armour, with bags

slung around their shoulders, ready to leave. The irregular square with a well in the middle was surrounded by buildings of the railway guard-room with a cargo- passenger ramp, where the Pilgrim train hissing with steam was standing now, an overground warehouse, a small stable, and an engine room, where a censor and a nun were standing in its slightly open port. The knights were leading between them, towards the platform, a human wreck of someone whom she once knew as the Lad.

“Nobody ever said he had been killed. He was missing, yes,” Thomas answered calmly, almost lightly. The woman watched the friar carefully, her eyes turned into narrow lines.

“What did he do to...?” Her voice stuck in her throat.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, my dear.”

“The pilgrimage tattoo. The punishment given by the Order’s censors. Within a day’s walk only you can...” She shook her head, as if wondering. She closed her eyes and frowned.

“How can I be sure you won’t do the same to me when we’re done? Regardless of the result?” she asked in a tired voice without opening her eyes.

She made a move as if she wanted to walk towards the three people passing by. The priest grabbed her arm, unexpectedly hard, and nodded his head, calling the monks from the engine room. The archivist hissed and tried to pull out of his grasp. The knights and the lad, hearing the scuffle, stopped and looked their way.

The priest leaned towards the archivist:

“You can’t.”

She snorted.

“Well, you can finish it yourselves then and sit there, one by one! I hope you die.”

The censor looked hard at the woman, as if thinking of something.

“You will finish it,” he said firmly. “No matter how much I don’t like it, this is the aim of the heresy: test every possibility of reaching the One, to turn the god’s machine against our enemies.”

The archivist jerked.

“I wonder how you’re going to make me do this,” she snarled.

Shadow passed over the censor’s face, but the man did not hesitate long.

“I will give you a chance. I’ll take a risk and let you personally prove if the crystal ascension is true or false. You will meet the god or perish. Isn’t that what you want?”

The metal plates of his armour screeched when Usama took a step towards the engine room’s gate. His raspy voice boomed in his helmet.

“Are you insane, Thomas?”

The archivist looked at the mutilated lad. She must have fought with her thoughts for a long while. Finally she turned her head away from the disfigured boy, looked at the ground, and said quietly:



“Oh, I will find him and make sure he throws you at the mercy of the demons. Just before he crushes them.”

“Brothers!” Thomas turned triumphantly to the monks, now standing beside him. “Connect her to the altar. And tie her to it, just to be sure! Switch on the steam generators! Everything seems to be back in its place again. The builder should be the one who stands first under his bridge after all, shouldn’t he?” The censor leaned to the archivist, whispering. “I’ve got blood on my hands, that’s true. But I never let my people get fried on pyres for me, so I can survive in hiding.”

The woman hissed something rude to the priest. The Pilgrim moved, his grabs screeched on the spear, and the knights, as if on cue, held him from both sides.

“Stop!” Jaeger hissed. “You can’t help it!”

“On the Weaver of Thoughts, on the love of the Lord of the Enlightenment, I swear to help you, boy, slay seven demons. And no, Thomas, this is not your jurisdiction.” Usama looked at the Order’s censor and said the words loudly, slowly. “This is the knight’s promise. And the boy will come back here as a free man. To get you.”

The priest shook his head resignedly.

“You still don’t understand anything, Usama. Honor won’t help you save your dear ones.”

Ibn Munkiz boarded the desperados train together with the youngster. And Jaeger... Jaeger only pretended he got on. Jaeger, as the knights decided together, had to stay. Just in case.

*The One stayed silent when I begged him for death for the cruel censor.  
He didn't take away the pain in my severed hands when I asked him to.  
He did not give me my speech back, didn't work a miracle.*

*His silence doesn't mean he doesn't exit, does it?*

The Testimony of the Nameless Pilgrim

One of the engineer brothers, following her instructions, set the little crystals from the tiny bundle in special furrows of the throne's arm. It was her last chance, in case the ghost hiding in the remains of the Insatiable would not be stunned with electric shocks.

The generator hissed, the lights flickered. The lightning flowed along the cables, biting one crystal after another, and waking a delicate bright glow inside them. She was afraid, terribly – they kept the strange self inside the structure with the electric trap, but now... Now she was supposed to travel through the god's tears, right under the nose of this invisible monster. She felt tingling on her forehead, under the metal band, and her fingertips suddenly went numb. The little metal needles placed in neuralgic places at the back of her head began to pinch with impulses. It has begun! Terrible pain, a flash of whiteness, and...

She felt as if a million needles burst each part of her body from the inside, again and again. The image of the underground warehouse

shimmered like a mirage in the hot air, and it became semitransparent. Suddenly she saw something like ghosts, porters carrying dozens of boxes, an image of what must have been a normal day at this place in the times before the demons' invasion. Then she saw a dark cave with ruined remains of her own installation, the silhouettes, drawn with glowing contours, of blasphemous flesh and steam constructs, fighting for crystals. The three images merged into one, they whirled, tangled together, and mixed in a collage of indistinguishable smears. The pain took away her consciousness. She wailed, but she couldn't hear her own voice. She sensed darkness, something really frightening, looming out of the whirlpool – and she made a run for it. She ran through a strange grey fog, when suddenly everything went quiet. The fear disappeared. She did not feel darkness behind her back anymore. Something new and omnipresent appeared. The archivist was overwhelmed with helplessness, which could be compared with the one which overwhelms a man standing in front of an avalanche hurling straight at him; horror and her own smallness against enormous power which you cannot hide from, which you cannot stop, for whom you are just dust in the way.

And then she felt even smaller, almost invisible, like a castaway in the middle of the ocean, a wild force to the horizon, and underneath – impenetrable, brutal depth. Wasn't it how humanity felt on the Judgment Day?

Then a harmony of voices jingled in her head, melting together and dispersing into a legion of sounds with every few words.

“Unbelievable. A creature of the seventh level was able to reach this level of communication? I’m impressed, indeed. Your race has just started a meaningful evolution after all. I guess you don’t even realize what you managed to achieve.” There was a moment of pause after this, as if the unknown being searched for the right comparison in the archivist’s head. In a fraction of a second she felt all her memories, images, scents, and sensations – the magnitude of all the information she had registered during her lifetime. “Well, it’s as if an ant on your planet built a combat walker. Impressive, impressive indeed.”

“Who are you? Are you the One? Where am I? Have I left the god’s tears?”

Overwhelming, stifling presence, all around and inside. Bursting her skull and at the same time tightening her head with a metal band.

“Many questions yet none that could be of any meaning in your situation. I have seen your memories. I have seen what you have done. What you all did to test your ridiculous theory about the god’s tears. By chance, you succeeded, and you want to waste your opportunity on such trivial questions? Try not to let me down.”

She felt crushed, even trampled over with the weight of this omnipresent voice. This being who made thoughts to be born and worlds perish, an overpowering presence whom nobody could oppose.

Nothing and nobody. The stifled thought lit up again, and she gathered some strength to speak out:

“So this is not a mirage, you do exist. I did what I had to do. For a creator, you are quite deaf to your people’s prayers. The one who is now getting killed in the fight with the demons. Perhaps you could save your faithful believers for a change?”

“Creator?” She sensed a clear surprise. “I see you did not understand my messages. I think I will start regretting that I left a piece of myself in this part of the galaxy.”

The implications of this statement made the archivist freeze.

“What? So you are not our creator? But the One, the ultramachine, the Weaver of Thoughts, it is you, right? What other messages are you talking about?”

“Incredible, indeed.” The world did a somersault, her head fell apart into a million little pieces, which some power turned over in all directions, and then everything came back to their places, as suddenly as it had started. “You could understand the essence of how the crystals work, create weapons, the train... See! An anti-storm tower. Great use, indeed! And yet you cannot understand simple non-technical information.” His voice trailed off for a moment. “Yes, but I need to remember that I see all this through the spectrum of your memories. Perhaps other representatives of your race are not so ignorant?”

“Perhaps.” She hesitated, weighing different options. “But they were not the ones who could get to you, only me. I am seeking enlightenment, the truth. I could take it back, your word of salvation, set the path to the gears of heaven. You know that I can do it, no matter the cost, you know I am efficient. All you have to do is to endow me with the grace of understanding, and I will lead my...” She searched for the right word for a moment. “...wards to you.” Yes, they were “wards”. It discreetly set the hierarchy from the very beginning. Definitely a good word.

She felt as if all this omnipresence focused on her and again kept tearing her into shreds, piece by piece, thoroughly looking at each of her parts: thought, memory. A spinning crystal appeared out of nowhere, its spikes growing out of one central point.

“Now I understand!” A dissonance of clearly excited tones could be heard. “Ambition! Infinite, bottomless, it will never be enough for you, you want more and more. This is the motor which let you evolve so fast. Funny, you are asking for help in the fight with the demons, and you don’t even realize how much you have in common with them.” The voice, strong again, united, seemed very amused. “But back to your request. How exactly do you want to lead *my people*? Consciously sending thousands onto pyres in the act of cowardice to save your own life? Remember that I know your memories. I know what happened in Verreden.”

“Ambition? That cattle was tormented by betrayal and doubts. Sick individuals in the herd must be killed so the healthy ones can survive.

Otherwise they will all perish. Give me a spark of your power so I can create constructs able to beat the demons, golems capable of rebuilding our houses. Make me your daughter among the people, and I will show them the way, open the archives, force them to study, and tame every rebellion with the iron of the machines. They will worship you even more than they do now, not out of fear for your deputies, but because of the testimony of the reason. The day will come when I will finally redefine good and evil at the reason's bidding. Then we will be free, ready to abandon our bodies and follow your steps."

She heard laughter as an answer.

"You are funny creatures, indeed. You bend morality to your own perspective. But your ambition is impressive, you don't even realize what power you have in you. Ambition powers history. It allows you to change what cannot be changed, create the greatest inventions, and modify reality. It cannot be stopped, even if thousands of other beings must perish. Your race has potential, yes..."

She stopped an outcry of joy. So she was right! She would get what she wanted, anointed by the god, she would become an unquestionable ruler of human souls!

"As for you," the choir of voices continued, "Well, I've been teasing you a little. You don't exist anymore. This whole conversation is happening out of the time and plan as you know them. Well, creating the seventh level could

never be a part of me. But I will honor your ambitions; I like your face. I will place it on my new toys.”

It didn't get through to her. What did he mean, she didn't exist anymore? Blackness and emptiness slowly started flowing in from all directions. She fought as hard as she could. She was supposed to become the most powerful human, a half-god. She couldn't die here. As if through fog she heard...

“Humans are really interesting. Interesting... Perhaps I should have a closer look at them. And I would also take the demons down a peg, they go crazy lately in this aspect... . And check how fast the Creation Committee reacts. Well... Decisions, decisions.”

The crystal suddenly started moving away, and the One's monologue turned into a noise of indistinguishable words, and then into a distant buzz. So that's it, just like that? The end? Emptiness? Images of faces burning in Verreden. That young Völklingenian, whom she seduced so easily and set him up to have a pretext for rebellion, for the censor to finally risk putting her on the throne, this whole intricately woven intrigue, all for nothing!

She felt disappointment, a tinge of regret. She wasted a life, a lot of beings, to find the god who did not want her at all.

Oh, no! She would get out of here! She would survive, out of spite against this arrogant thing, out of spite against the Order! Perhaps she could still fix something, change something for the better. She moved



on and ran away from the sticky darkness. She knew that if she fell into its embrace, she would give in. So many tester architects died with the word “darkness” on their lips! She ran, through the god’s tears, already cooled off but uninhabited yet, through the emptiness not filled with any hellish soul, caught mid-way. She ran for a blink of an eye and for an infinitely long time at once. The darkness chasing her rippled at the edge of sight. She felt emptiness around her again, and a sharp tip of a crystal under her finger, somewhere eons--or maybe a heartbeat?-away. She heard a terrifyingly inhuman giggle, echoing in the space. She was so close, would be back in just a moment.

She never came back.

The train with the pilgrims reached its destination the day before the events later dubbed the Battle of Eld-Hain. The knight accompanied the lad like a shadow, shrugging off any questions with grumbles and pointing at the runes of the oath, blackening on his steam armour.

At dawn the demons showed up on the foregrounds of the Refuge, and the slaughter began.

A division of Pilgrims was moved to defense of the mechgate which blocked the access to the southern railway post of Eld-Hain. The mutilated lad was among them, and a huge knight in steam armour followed him like a shadow.

Perhaps it was due to his presence that the division did not scatter when the terrifying bloody-black shapes finally bit through the gate,

making way for the charging demons. Some kind of magic unknown to them made the skin on their necks crawl, and fear screamed in the men's heads, telling them to flee. The convicts, urged with the booming voice of Usama, stood on the inner barricades, surrounding the gate, as well as on the ramps above it. They crushed the first wave of the demons, excited with the promise of the imminent victory. The tracks turned into a swamp of blood and debris.

“Three more,” Usama whispered loudly to the lad.

“Now you've found yourself a patron. Is he banging you?” The voice from the side was corroded with bitterness.

“Let go, Baldie. You can see he's mute, both hands cut off. And the knight has black runes on his steam armor, some fucking oath, or a promise. Better stick with them, and we'll kill our seven.”

“What the fuck do we need those seven for, if we don't live until sunset, Rattie? What the fuck for, I ask?”

“Don't talk shit, we're still standing. Hey, they're comin', hold the spear, Baldie!”

Yapping demons started jumping through a hole burnt out with magic, neither monsters, nor enormous dogs. It was hard to see the details through a curtain of rain. They quickly reached the barricades, yanking the reinforcements, spears, Pilgrims defending them. Fangs, claws, and steel flashed. Screams of the wounded and the dying mixed in the air with the wailing of the slaughtered hellhounds. Four- and six-

legged demons charged forward, not caring about the whirring teeth of mechspears, or the shower of stones, arrows, and boiling oil from above. Only to push forward, bite, yank a piece of flesh, taste some human blood. The Pilgrims bravely kept up with the devils, but they were dying too – and unlike the charging creatures, nobody refilled their decimated ranks.

“The Weaver of Thought, forgive me, as I will not keep my oath,” Ibn Munkiz, in his steam armour, gloomily muttered the warrior’s song of remorse, and slashed at another devilish hound. An enormous demon, almost twice the size and strength of a man, was squeezing through the gate. It was so huge that the defenders, despite the pouring rain, saw the filed fangs in its mouth, the horn covered with blood on its forehead, the breast covered with a strange plait of bones, metal, and only the One knows what else. The devil finally tore through the opening and gave out a roar which instantly made a people freeze with fear. Behind it, behind the gate, silhouettes of other giants loomed. A Brute pointed the mace in his hand straight at the jagged barricades ahead, and the hounds which were still alive wailed like wolves gathering for a hunt.

Both Usama and the mutilated mechanic, as well as the handful of defenders still standing, prepared for imminent death, when it all suddenly cleared up. They looked up, a swift rush of wind dispersed the rainclouds, and rays of bright light gushed towards the ground. A rainbow flashed at the edge of light and rain. The demon, only a moment earlier so sure of his

advantage, covered his eyes with his forearm, and the terrifying howling of the hell pack turned into a cacophony of barks. The pillars of light widened, flooding the battlefield with brightness. The clang of weapons gave way to stifled shouts of disbelief and surprised growls. Something strange appeared in the air, little discharges jumped over the knights' armour, the steam crystals burned with new fire, steam gushed in the cables with double force. Usama closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He felt oddly light, the pain in his body, tired from fighting, disappeared just like that. He didn't know if it was because of the sun which tore through the clouds, something not seen in Eld-Hain for decades, or maybe there was another reason. Suddenly, in the middle of the light pillars, shadows appeared – small at first, they kept growing with every moment. The knight opened his eyes, feeling the mechanisms of his armour being filled with the One's grace, his panzer spoiling for a fight, and he grinned with a half-crazy smile, gripping the handle of his sword tighter with his hand. At first it seemed to him that those were some enormous birds, although nobody had seen birds for generations, but soon he understood his mistake. He heard a flapping of giant wings, when huge silhouettes circled over the fighting, neither winged machines, nor...

On the name of the One! Mechanical angels! They charged towards the ground, straight at the demons, roaring daringly. Usama raised his shield and charged forwards, encouraging his companions in a raspy voice:

“God with us!”

*Death screeched with the parts of mechanisms and the teeth of scythes, croaked with the sparks of lightning imprisoned in wings, whistled with the air cut by neither golems, nor angel horrors charging down, splashed with the gushing blood, squelched with the swamp of severed members, which we tore through in this suicidal attack. And a shadow of wings fell over me, and doom, rattling with cogwheels, swished around me with the scythe's blade.*

*The Testimony of the Nameless Pilgrim*

Ibn Munkiz took a blow on the shield and slashed blindly, almost losing his balance on the boards, slippery with blood and rain. Behind Usama's back, on the platform of the outer station of Eld-Haim, a crippled pilgrim was trying to get up from his knees. Not far away, a winged mechanical giant tirelessly raised and lowered his scythe, carving bloody crevices in the ranks of the demons charging at the barricades.

Clatter, whistling, sounds of carriages being crushed, thrown to the sides by the armoured wedge. Those were *Arrowhead* and two other steam engines charging on the tracks, straight at the giant devils slaughtering the last row of the pilgrims. The lightning bolts crawling over the trains spilled sparks. The smell of ozone filled the air.

A hell hound grabbed and yanked the arm guard of Usama's steam armour, throwing him on the ground. The Pilgrim, sliding, got to them, and the mechspear yapped with its chain. The blood and bones of the creature splashed in all directions.

The steam engines rolled along the platform with a rattle, battering the ones who were fighting by the barricade. Pilgrims, demons, the smaller and the giant ones, wooden barriers, sand sacks, bent steel – it all mixed in a horrific tangled mess.

“Seventh,” Ibn Munkiz rasped, tearing the monster’s head off his forearm. The Pilgrim didn’t listen. He stood there, perplexed, looking at the angel nearby.

“Well I’ll be jiggered,” the knight moaned, standing next to the lad. “Is that really her?”

*And when I slaughtered the seventh one, a steel face looked at me – her face, the visage of the woman from the platform, the archivist from Arrowhead.*

*The Testimony of the Nameless Pilgrim*

The steam engines broke the horde’s charge, crushing everything on their way, before they finally fell off the tracks. The crews would hold their fierce defense for another few prayers. They would drag the mechanical knights and the Pilgrims, blinded with bloody heat, after them. Steel seraphs raged above them, tirelessly slaying hundreds of beasts. The fate of the battle, seemingly already lost, now turned completely.

One of the mechangels dove at a fleeing demon, tearing him in half with one cut of his scythe. The eyes in the metallic mask gave a strange glow. Something flowed in the air between the dying devil and the machine.

Suddenly, the seraphs under Eld-Hain went still.

*My friend,*

*The Chapter surrounds the truth with a plot of silence, taking the report of a young Pilgrim, written down by this amiable acolyte, for a blasphemous apocryphon. They ordered to burn all its copies. It is not the time to push into a fratricidal quarrel. Hide this scroll well, perhaps your children will be able to give justice to the nameless ones, and to the price they had paid for our survival. And if you wish to ask any questions, visit me.*

Usama Ibn Munkiz

First Furusiyya of the Holy Knights of the Order

Heavy steps scuffed up little clouds of dust, destroying the faces carefully drawn in the dirt. The handless one raised his head, fury flashed in his eyes, unhuman sputter sounded from his throat – and suddenly it all went silent, as if cut with a knife.

The big man looked at the cripple. The knight wore steam armour, marked with rusty scars on the arm-pieces where the Order's emblems used to be engraved. His face was grim, his eyes tired. The cripple looked at him more consciously now: he knew him.

“Ahab was not so nice to die from the paws of demons,” the knight said. “Well, he actually returned to health and managed to get back the wreck of *Arrowhead* from the foregrounds of Eld-Hain. He is rebuilding the... What do you call it? The mechteam? Anyway, he is gathering men for the renovation of the train.”

The handless, maneuvering his grabs, raised a stick and poked the armor in the place where the marks had been removed. He raised his eyebrows in question.

“This? Let’s say I... renounced the Order’s law. I would have been dead by now, but the Chapter have enough to think about without worrying about some famous renegade knight. First they have to dish some dirt on me in every chapel from here to Al-Iskandariya, and before people believe that, it will take time, it will.” The man smiled unpleasantly, tightening his mechanical glove with a screech. “I am not fooling myself, they will believe it at last. This is our dog nature, to believe in lies. I was told to be quiet, even lie about what had happened in that railway post. I wasn’t up for a scam in the One’s name. I have a lot on my conscience, but that’s enough, I don’t want to add any more,” he said, suddenly serious. “I was thinking that we could call at Ahab.”

The cripple snorted, and drew out his grabs in front of himself. The knight looked around, and pointed at the half-blurred portraits on the ground.

“You are doing quite well with drawing, as I can see, Acolyte – you had to explain somehow to the Scribe too what had happened. You are smart. You could also exchange your grabs for more practical ones. As for her... Most probably you won’t meet her again. Get used to it and pull yourself together, boy. Move on with your life.”



The lad lowered his head, as if pondering. Usama silently waited for his decision.

In the shed, at the outskirts of Vlklingen, the hammer clanged against the armour of the locomotive, waking the *Arrowhead's* wreck from its steamless dream.





# CHAMPION OF THE SEVENTH FERRATA



“Hyperbole” Rewrite #1, Draft III (master count: 4)

Koltho balked the hoof of his right leg against the Pilgrim’s chest and pulled on his colossal, toothed mace that jammed inside the feeble human’s ribcage. The demon’s overpowered stroke made it sink in through the pulp of the head, almost splitting the poor man’s body in two, as the horns, tusks and fangs bristling the weapon caught onto the ribs and sinew that keep the stuffing of humans together.

“Pain is necessary. Pain makes you grow. Pain is a challenge to keep yourself strong,” he declaimed as he pulled and pulled on the torn, meaty rag doll that just would not come off. ”In pain we are moulded and through pain we are fired. Pain is our lives’ utmost desire. Don’t overcome it – force yourself upon it, and always make sure that you’re ready for more. For as long as you feel it, one thing’s for certain – you’re still walking tall over those who lay down.”

“What’s that you’re muttering, Koltho? Something wrong?” another Brute demon asked perversely as its thirteen-foot sword cleaved

horizontally through weapons and bodies of at least three men in one swing; their divided bodies crumbling to the ash-laden ground like shattered clay sculptures. “Fleshy buggers, aren’t they? I told you – bring a proper razor,” the sword-wielding demon took another swing, felling five more Pilgrims at once. “This is like haying a field of hungry sand eels!”

“Weak in life and irritating in death, is what these humans are,” Koltho replied, as he grabbed the arm of the body still hooked around the head of his mace. “But still, Taruel, you’d be a fool to underestimate a whole species just by the look of its pawns. Skill and ferocity alone will take you only so far. Observe the teachings of the Khyber. Only then will you become complete. A force to be reckoned with throughout the many Orders of the Bulk,” he warned, clasping his weapon’s handle closer to its head of cast iron beast craniums. “That being said, you’ll see how my Bone Gavel proves useful once their armour rolls-out.” And in one rending pull, Koltho tore the mutilated Pilgrim off the head of his mace and a gushing stream of blood from the opened arteries splashed the demon’s ogrish face with a fitting mush of bone, teeth and brain matter.

“And when is this armour coming, centurion?” Taruel raised his terrible *zweihänder* over his head and stood on one leg. “Do we have to mow these weaklings down to the last one before it all becomes worthwhile?”

As if in a response to this taunt, which they could not possibly understand, a throng of crazed Pilgrims swarmed him from all directions. He skewed the hawk guard greatsword forty five degrees to the side, and his muscular body swung into a spin on the edge of his one lowered hoof. He then leveled the blade with the horizon, sprung into the air with his other leg – turning a whirl as he leaped, further increasing the momentum of his revolutions – and hovered down onto the converging mass of Pilgrims like a gargantuan maple fruit; its corkscrewing, razor-sharp wing portioning their fragile bodies head-to-toe, as if eggs put to a slicer.

Koltho nodded in admiration of his protégé's whirlwind technique. Perfect execution – he jotted in his mind, as part of Trael's ongoing trial by combat – confident, fearsome, destructive; the very words of Brute Khyber are embodied in his swordsmanship. What conjunction of the Orders must have occurred at his birth to gift him with such terrible power? But a great deal of schooling still awaited the young prodigy. The primordial animal, that dwelled within him so strong – trying to break through the Bonds of Uplifting – needed to be tamed. The cruelty and thirst for blood channeled out of the mind and into the muscles. For the mind orders the body, not the other way around and the Khyber was key. He had to embrace it and let it guide him. Only then would he be ready to command his own centuria and perhaps one day, even a whole legion. What luck indeed it was to work on such a formidable successor. What luck and honor, indeed.

“Very good, Taruel,” Koltho applauded out loud. “I see you’ve made me some room.”

“What? Room?” still spinning, the young demon panted and slowly lowered the point of his wailing *zweihänder* to the ground. As it kissed the dirt, it drew an almost full circle before Taruel lost his vicious momentum. “They’re too mushy,” the demon puffed, “no scale; no bone; my Galatyn wouldn’t stop. Too mushy.”

“Yes. Unlike that one,” Koltho pointed his skullmace towards an approaching Holy Knight – a steam-augmented, crystal-powered, full plate exoskeleton, glistening and clanging from behind the towering arrowhead shape of his thick runeshield. This one used an ornamental polearm glaive almost twice his size.

“Now, that’s more like it!” Taruel declared enthusiastically having noticed the approaching Knight; his *zweihänder* now in long tail guard.

“Hold it,” Koltho commanded.

“The fuck I will!”

And as the sword-wielding Brute prepared to lunge towards the plate-clad man, Koltho’s massive hand clasped the back of Taruel’s neck and immobilized him.

“I said: hold it, young’un,” Koltho’s muscular arm pressed the young Brute down to the ground.

“Please, centurion, let me have him! In your honor!” Taruel pleaded from his knees.

“No. You shall obey the Khyber, and you will obey me. You can have the others of his kind, but the first one’s mine.” Koltho turned to the Knight and chuckled, “This is a leader. He is mine.” Taruel felt the grip of his master’s hand relaxing, and as he got up from his knees, he watched the oldest Brute centurion confidently walking away towards the approaching suit of armour.

The Knight came straight from the city and through its largest gateway, the Meggido, facing directly into the rocky ravine in which the battle took place. A scar almost a mile deep and dozens of miles long, left over by one of the largest Judgement Day meteors that fell from the skies at an angle virtually parallel to the ground. Eld-Hain’s skyline – itself being no more than two miles away and framed by two mountainous slopes on its left and right – filled the western end of the valley, while the city’s tallest, innermost Storm Spire, that at this moment split the low sun’s disc in two, cast an extensive shadow over the whole ravine, veiling the battlefield in premature twilight. The two armies sorted and divided as the remaining Pilgrims broke melee and retreated behind a vast regiment of Holy Knights marching in behind their leader. A line formation was assumed, stretching to either slope of the valley, effectively forming a buffer behind which the human force began regrouping. On the other side, the Brutes stirred around Taruel and his gigantic *zweihänder*, looking out in anticipation towards the beginning of a duel between their esteemed centurion and a champion of human armour.



Ish watched it all from the edge of the southern slope, half a mile back east. She stood on the steps of her throne, an ancient gestatorial chair carried on the backs of two Brute Hounds, whose simple minds she had dominated centuries ago. While on the outside no more than a symbol of her sovereignty, the throne's interior stored the mythical Blood Magic machinery; a combination of abstract devices, through which the Queen of Illusions channeled her powers of deception and untruth.

“So easy,” she said to herself with bitter disenchantment as she walked down the stairs of her throne and onto its square base. “There I was. Thinking it will be different this time . . . I expected a challenge! And all I got is yet another race with more gumption than its puppeteer . . . Maybe I should preserve these humans? Take out a few; breed them on some ridiculous garden planet inside the most backwater brane imaginable, and then, after a million years, come back and pick a fight . . . Would a million years do it? Make it two then.”

She strolled the length of the throne's base with arms akimbo, seemingly not at all concerned with the duel that was about to take place in the valley below. As if it was just a set piece to a game that she had played over and over again.

“I guess these grunts do have a point with these mantras of theirs,” she continued under her breath. “You do need to keep exceeding yourself . . . Otherwise it's all just plain boring.”



Having sighed and shaken her head, she sat down with her feet tucked up under her on the second step to the chair of her throne, and stared down at the captain of her minions, who was now slowly walking up towards the human champion.

“Skip your Khyberian honors, centurion,” the succubus said to herself. “You’re not getting out of this alive anyway.”



“I salute you, human,” Koltho let the shaft of his mace slide through his hand until it hit the ground. “Let us join in glorious combat and may the stronger one win,” the demon declared and took a peek over his shoulder, towards the galvanized members of his centuria. “I pray there indeed is a powerful warrior inside this can, otherwise we shall have to take the head of our beloved Prime for wasting our time once too often!” the devilish centurion shouted, to which Taruel and the rest of his minions responded with a terrible roar as they simultaneously rose their weapons into the air in a violent gesture of approval – the Brute caste way.

“I shan’t fear my enemy,” The Holy Knight declaimed in human tongue as he got down to his knees. “For greater is he, who dwelleth within me, than he, whom I shall fight.”

“Is that a prayer of some sort?” Koltho asked. “Very well, take your time.”

“Though they may be many, though they may be more, and though they might think themselves to be strong,” the Knight continued. “My One god loves me, my One god keeps me, my One god inspires and

shelters my soul. My skin, my blood, my bones in thy name – this ground I proclaim as my altar today. Take hold of this body and ignite its senses – make me your weapon, and let glory be to thee!”

Having calmed down, Taruel scanned the southern slope of the valley for the invasion’s Prime caste supreme commander – Ish. Having found her on the edge of the escarpment, half a mile back towards the impact crater and a transversal portal that lied within, he wondered if his centurion’s earlier taunt towards her was not too bold a statement. Especially since how frightened of her he once said he was. And although Taruel would never openly admit it, that seemingly hominine and deceptively vulnerable female devil scared him as well.

“Whenever you’re ready, human,” the demon centurion taunted.

“I shall strike you down, beast, in the name of my god and Chapter!” The Holy Knight champion uttered through his teeth.

“Finally! Whatever that was, it sure didn’t sound like a plea for life!” Koltho laughed, having not understood a single word. “By the Khyber, I shall consider that your first move. Now it’s my turn.” The demon lowered its posture and readied its skullmace. “Defend yourself!”

And Taruel watched with envious admiration as his great mentor and friend launched towards the Holy Knight champion like an old ram buffalo in rabid frenzy. A dozen strides in, Koltho sprung into the air while swinging his mace backwards; the steel skulls on its head almost touching his two airborne hoofs. The human crouched down, raised his

runeshield over his head and took the full force of Koltho's attack, as the overloaded joints of his armour puffed out steam while dispersing the skullmace's kinetic energy. The shield sustained a crack half through its length, but the exoskeleton itself, amazingly survived intact.

"You're still alive down there, human? No bones broken?" Koltho asked with a mixture of admiration and disbelief. "Most impressive."

"My god is my shield! And his word my armor!" the human screamed as he shifted his position left for a counterattack.

"Good! Very good, human!" the demon shouted. "May your hate for my kind give you strength, but don't let it spoil your skills with that polearm!"

As the Knight rose from his initial squatting position, he lowered his shield and immediately performed a steam-powered swing with his glaive, the speed of which making the sanctified blade at the end of its shaft wail like a vibrating wine glass. Koltho's eyes widened when the glaive's edge passed a few inches from the tip of his nose. He replied furiously with a horizontal swing of his mace, but the Knight ducked down from its path and countered with a thrust from a low whirl on his right heel.

"Yes!" the demon screamed in ecstasy as the glaive pierced his right thigh. "By the Khyber! Where have you been for the past century?!" Koltho smiled to the Knight, his human eyes staring incredulously at the overjoyed devil through the visor of his helmet. "Truly, this was an

honor, and a pleasure. But now, I must kill you.” Koltho flexed the muscles in his pierced thigh – immobilizing the glaive to the shock of its wielder – and broke the weapon’s wooden shaft in two with a mighty swing of his mace.

“Taruel, my boy?” Koltho shouted back over his shoulder. “All of you! Observe how my Bone Gavel deals with armoured flesh!”

And as Koltho swung the mace back for a finishing strike, the Knight dropped the glaive’s broken shaft, reached with the freed hand behind his runeshield and produced a crystal-powered pistol crossbow. The demon froze, as the single, massive bolt resting in the weapon’s flight groove rose to his face and fired with a puff of steam.

“What happened?!” Taruel shouted, as the skullmace slid out of the mighty demon’s grip and fell to the ground.

Koltho’s hulk took a wobbling step backwards and fell on its back. The supercharged bolt impaled the demon’s skull through its left eye and blew out a good part of its upper cranium, where the heavy quarrel’s jagged end now stuck out from a bloody mush of shredded brain matter.

“Huzzah! Huzzah!” the line of regular Knights chanted for their victorious commander.

“This is impossible!” Taruel protested hysterically, “Centurion!”

“Thank you, Master Engineer, Weaver of Thoughts, Lord of Enlightenment,” the Knight leader prayed to the sky as he stood over Koltho’s corpse. “Thou guidest my mind and body. I follow, till thy will is done.”

“Cheating cur! I’ll cut you in half!” Taruel tore his throat as he launched towards the praying Knight; his gigantic *zweihänder* in long tail. Having crossed half of the distance to the man in six long bounds, the young demon leaped into the air and threw his sword at a skewed angle to the human’s shielded standing posture. The weapon whirled through the air like a structural beam hurled out from a violently exploding building. It cleaved the Knight in half along with his shield – collarbone to opposite hip – and dug into the ground right beside him, just in time for its owner to land and pick it up.

“What are you waiting for?!” Taruel shouted at the astounded centuria of Brutes behind him. “Rend them limb from limb and wring the ichor from their dismembered bodies! I want Koltho’s corpse floating in a pool of human blood before the day is over – charge!”

The humans regarded each other in horror as their suits of armour rattled to the hoof beat of muscle and iron that approached in a hellish tidal wave. Driven by the image of their fallen chief, and the unrelenting courage on the part of his successor, the demons trampled the Holy Knight line like a regiment of heavy cavalry running into a formation of peasants. Blood, guts and severed limbs shot and streaked into the air, like molten metal from the surface of a boiling smelting pool. The sheer weight of Taruel’s enormous greatsword crushed what it could not cut of human armor, often hurling the plate-clad Knights dozens of

feet into the air as it cleaved, slashed and whirled in every direction. It was butchery.

“Is this it? Is this all they’re capable of?” the young demon roared having felled a dozen men in one swing of his sword. “Ishigasi!” he shouted towards the Prime caste supreme commander, still passively observing the battle from her high vantage of the southern slope’s edge. “Where is the glory we’ve been promised? Where is the honor? Surely, this is not what you’ve had in your conniving mind?”

He could not tell if she could hear him amidst the noise of the battle around him, but he could swear he felt their eyes meet.

“Answer me, Ish!” Taruel continued as his brethren went on with the slaughter, “Our centurion is dead! Look! There is his body!” His hand motioned towards the basin where Koltho fell and lied next to the Holy Knight’s divided carcass amidst a pool of blood and spilled innards. “Aren’t you an all-knowing cunt of a Prime? Why didn’t you warn him?”

He regarded the hominine female devil for a moment longer, until she suddenly got up from the stairs of her throne, raised her right hand and pointed in the direction of Eld-Hain.

Other Brute warriors saw it before him, as a brilliant, glistening ray of golden light that pierced the ominous dark clouds above, gracefully lowered it down from the firmament. The fine ash, of which a thick layer covered the whole ravine, rose with each graceful step of its plated clockwork feet, as the majestic construct slowly marched towards the

astonished invaders. Taller than three adult humans and by a head from any Brute, the fabled Angel of Death carried a formidable powerscythe with a chainsaw blade of razor-sharp fangs, each one the size of a grown man's opened hand.

"What the fuck is going on?" Taruel muttered under his breath while his legionary brothers welcomed the approaching adversary and his ever-benign steel visage with an array of sarcasm, mockery and insulting challenges. One by one the demons stepped out of its way as by the Khyber it was Taruel who now had the honour of engaging any new foe of the Seventh Ferrata. Still, each and every demon on the battlefield wanted a piece of this promisingly imposing opponent, but the divine automaton failed to respond to their efforts at grabbing its attention.

Having noticed a passage to the Angel forming before him, Taruel took up a battle stance and rested his *zweihänder's* blade on his right shoulder.

"Form a circle!" he ordered. "I shall honor our centurion by felling this contraption in his name."



Ish walked up the stairs to the chair of her throne and raised her hands to the sky.

"Akaron. Istaroth. Akiba, Ordobas – Camieli," her voice boomed through the air and shook the ash-laden battleground as if it was

the Day of Judgement meteors falling all over again; each syllable a calamitous impact. “I have walked the Great Fold. I have climbed the Planar Ridge . . . Akaron! You, the First Born! The Openers of Spaces! . . . Istaroth! You, who shape dimensions! The Weavers of Time! . . . Akiba, Ordobas – Camieli! The Judges and Sentinels; the Eternal Serpents, the Great Transcendants! . . . I am Onoskelis, Hemostophilé, Ishigasi. I request your judgment! Fold over your Hyperbolic Domain onto this lowest of planes. Show me but a facet from the Ideal Order and infuse my essence with your Infinite Vertices of Consequence . . . Directions are as follows. Order Hendekillion Dodecacomb; master regiment – Dircospid; manifold – Gnarsis-Pastuxphi; sub-regiment tier one – Idcossid; sub-manifold – Sadroshax. Align to garden world – Erden; human population centre – Eld-Hain.”



A black cylinder hovered within an abstract realm of endlessly repetitive fractal patterns, each one a hexagonal cobweb of cellular copies reducing in size with the overall complexity. The curvature of space was infinite. It bended and folded onto itself like light bouncing inside a highly refractive glass marble. It could have all been impossibly small. It could have all been unfathomably large. It could have also been both, as everything seemed to be inside and outside of everything, all at the same time. In the Hyperbolic Domain, dimensions were just a function of compaction.



The cylinder skewed slightly to the right and the fractal started moving. As if the refracting marble entered a spin on its vertical axis, the spherically curved patterns unwound from a blinding speck of white light on the left and wound back to another one on the right. The fully decompressed cells meandering through the vast transitional region between the two light sources followed suit, as everything seemed to be unfolding out of everything and folding back onto itself anywhere and everywhere on every scale of complexity. It was difficult to say what in fact was in motion. It could have been the tubular construct, or the very curvature of space, shifting all around it.

Then the marble stopped spinning and the cylinder began zooming in onto the core of the central pattern. It plunged in between the infinite cells and accelerated, until its velocity stretched them all to look like vibrating strings, converging at a single point in front of the cylinder that marked its direction of passage.

After an arbitrary amount of time in full speed, the cylinder decelerated, and arrived inside a stack of perfectly black spheres. Row after row, column after column and layer after layer, the matte globes radiated with a reddish glow and hanged evenly distributed within a luminous white fog, as if atoms, structured on the chemical scaffolding of an immeasurable crystal. The cylinder picked a seemingly random sphere and dove into it.

Having passed the black boundary, it emerged amidst an infinitude of unnaturally regular elliptical galaxies, spread out through a dark void in a way mirroring that of the globes one dimensional level above. The cylindrical traveler aligned its vertical axis with a galaxy so far away, that its red-shifted dot was barely visible. It then warped through space at a speed vastly exceeding that of light itself and ended up in the core of a galactic nucleus, where myriads of stars revolved around a gigantic black hole on acutely oval and intertwining orbits.

And something else was there. Something from outside of this symmetric universe. An alien presence. A parasite. It emerged from behind the curvature of the black hole's event horizon as the cylinder moved into a low spiraling orbit. A titanic, radial jumble of dark-gray spikes, quills and lances, latched onto the hole's dark threshold like a nightmarish burr, impaling deep into the casually censored interior with its terrible skewers in the cosmic equivalent of a viral carrier injecting its essence into an eukaryotic cell. The cylinder skimmed the event horizon and slipped through.

On the other side awaited a familiar space-time of randomly distributed galaxies in all shapes and sizes. The black traveler aligned itself with one of the spirals and jumped towards it, as all the others smudged into continuous lines. Finally it arrived in high orbit around a majestic garden planet, Erden, with its one massive continent, Sequestria. The cylinder descended towards Sequestria's central region,

where an amassing of cataclysmic craters marked ground zero of the Day of Judgement meteor barrage. There, near the edge of the largest caldera, at the end of a long ravine, lay the great human city of Eld-Hain.

An almost perfect ring of mighty walls encircled its heavily industrialized interior from which a multitude of extraordinarily wide railway tracks fanned out towards the other six Sanctuary Cities of the surviving human race. Each set of tracks ran through a tunnel deep under the walls, and other than those underpasses, there was only one other way into the city – the Meggido Gate. A towering set of steam-powered doors operated by factory-sized engines with boilers the size of a six-storey tenement. The clanging of their belt pulleys and gears made the ground shake when turned on.

In the very core of Eld-Hain's interior, where the various chimneys and towers seemingly competed with each other to be the tallest of them all, there stood the great Storm Spire. Its elegant, almost mile-high silhouette served a single, but crucial purpose – the discharging of an energy buildup from the vast underground deposits of crystals that the humans have amassed for future use in their many scientific, military and industrial endeavors. Once a day, the Spire fired into the ever-cloudy sky a horrendous thunderbolt that took full five minutes to dissipate completely with all its many branches and offshoots. There was not a single sheet of glass within the whole of Eld-Hain that did

not tremble when the Storm Spire released its charge, and not a human being alive that did not marvel at the spectacle of lightning that followed.

The black cylinder oriented itself vertically to the ground and descended towards a miles-long ravine that ran from the base of Eld-Hain's Meggido Gate to the west, and ended into a cataclysmic impact crater to the east, illuminated from its innermost region by a shimmering source of blinding reddish light. As it continued towards the surface, it flew over the Brute centuria with its new champion ready to engage the Angel of Death, and hovered towards a feminine silhouette standing on a gray rectangular object by the southern shoulder of the ash-laden valley.



“By the Khyber – what was this terrible voice, master Taruel?” a genuinely frightened Brute warrior inquired.

“Look!” another demon shouted. “There is blackness moving across the sky!”

“What is it? What is it?” more Brutes shouted with their raised fingers tracking the dreamlike anomaly as it slowly descended from cloudy evening skies and moved over their heads towards the southern slope of the valley.

It did not reflect any light at all, nor did it cast a shadow – it in itself being one – therefore it was impossible to discern its true form. From this perspective, it looked like a five hundred feet high, and a hundred

feet wide oblong hole in the sky, as if it was indeed a wandering shear in the very fabric of reality and all that lay on its other side was a void of purest nothing.

“I don’t know, brothers.” Trael admitted. “I’ll go ask our benevolent Prime once I have dealt with this contraption.”

The scythe-wielding seraph genuflected and lowered its head as the circle of demons closed behind it. Trael commandingly raised his left hand and all of the Brute centuria silenced at once.

“Humans!” he bawled at the spires of Eld-Hain rising behind the Angel’s outstretched wings. “How shameful of you to hide behind puppets so soon! Be sure, through – we shall make your lives truly priceless! As we roll over your species into extinction!”

And as the ash-laden ravine carried Trael’s echoing taunt to the whole of human kind, his brethren roared and clanged their terrible weapons together in an eruption of heightened morale.

“Now.” the young demon’s voice lowered as his index finger rose to the Angel. “The coward, who operates this fancy gizmo – prepare yourself! For once I have shattered your toy, I am coming for you.”

The Angel of Death got up from its knee and launched skyward with a powerful flap of its clockwork wings. A great plume of turbulent ash rose from the ground and followed it through the air as the automaton lobbed towards Trael with the fanged chain of its powerscythe’s blade in full speed.

The demon's pointed finger tracked its airborne target until the Angel dove down with its weapon primed for a reaping swing. Taruel raised his sword to hawk guard in anticipation of a free-fall attack, but then, the seraph cut its trajectory short and entered a skimming glide that kicked up a continuous plume of ash in its path. As he noticed the change and the roaring scythe set to passively cut at his waist with only the momentum of its wielder's flight, Taruel balked with his right hoof, clasped the cross guard of his *zweihänder* with one hand and its blade with the other, and impaled the sword edge-down at an acute angle into the ground before him, almost exactly like one would do with a wooden pike to stop incoming cavalry. But in this case, the pike was set backwards to the attacker and formed, what with the greatsword's vertically oriented blade, looked like the business end of a makeshift log splitter. As he firmly held the grip of his strangely repurposed weapon, a cunning smirk on the young demon's face betrayed that this was in fact a deliberate move.

It flew too fast to be able to react in time. The roaring chainsaw chine of its scythe jammed on Taruel's skewed greatsword the moment its edge got in between the speeding fangs. The blade became a rail on which both the scythe and its majestic wielder rode upwards until the chine hit the sword's cross guard and stopped violently while breaking free from the Angel's grasp and sending it into a tumbling lob over Taruel's head.

Knowing exactly that this would happen, the young demon did not wait. He unhooked the jammed scythe from his sword, pulled the blade

out of the ground and turned on his left hoof towards the seraph, which surprisingly landed on its both clockwork legs a few dozen feet away. Taruel launched towards the staggered automaton with his *zweihänder* in long tail and swung horizontally through its knees, cutting both calves clean off in one swishing cleave.

The Angel wobbled, then slipped off its two severed limbs and braced itself with its hands as it fell to the ground, not quite on all fours. Taruel approached from behind, pinned its torso to the ground with his right hoof and rammed his sword through its neck of gears and hydraulics like a continuous guillotine blade. The weapon sunk into the ground again and its owner triumphantly left it there, as he stepped over the immobilized seraph and tore its head off with one effortless pull.

“Very good! I never would’ve thought I’ll be using the Galatyn in such fashion!” Taruel gloated with the Angel’s head held high above his own as his fellow legionnaires stared in silence, not exactly sure what happened. “Such elaborate finesse of craftsmanship,” the demon regarded his foe’s cast iron visage. “Now give my brothers a go!”

The circle of Brute warriors whooped with laughter and celebratory shouts as they converged on their victorious champion, who flung his trophy towards Eld-Hain like a stone projectile hurled by a catapult.

“Taruel! Taruel!” the surrounding Brutes shouted as the head soared through the air. “More coming! More toys! These are ours! These are all ours!”

Indeed, twelve more Angels of Death descended from the sky in a line formation barring the way to Eld-Hain.

“Have at them, brothers,” Taruel permitted. “I shall now pay a little visit to that cunt of a Prime who calls herself our commander.”

“We’ll try to leave some for when you return!” another legionary assured playfully.

“Glory to the Seventh Ferrata!” Taruel saluted his brethren.

“Glory!” the whole centuria reciprocated.

As he walked away, Taruel regarded the black anomaly, now merged with the ravine’s southern side like a round tower of a surreal hilltop keep, built into one of its slopes. Ish was inside, as were all the answers.



The Throne of Ish stood within a tubular perimeter of most peculiar properties. It felt like standing under an enormous upended tumbler. The blackness was gone, but everything on the other side of it was frozen and completely desaturated into various shades of gray. Up above, a thin circle of blurred clouds marked the glass’ circumference, where its walls met with the inverted bottom in a highly refractive edge. Only the cylindrical interior retained colors and hues natural to this world. This effect only strengthened the feeling of being completely ungrounded from absolutely everything. The laws of nature, life and death, time – the Queen of Illusions felt no longer determined by those



things, buffered and veiled from their influence by a shadow of casual censorship.

Ish knelt on the base of her gestatorial chair, just above the heads of her two dominated Brute Hounds, and as she squeezed her eyes shut and covered them with her hands, a point-sized source of blinding light hovered in the middle of the cylinder's top plane as a thundering shockwave from its ignition echoed around the Prime, her silhouette bleached-out by a blooming white glow. After a moment, the pinhead supernovae turned into an expanding ring that slowly filled the tumbler's upended bottom with a view into the Hyperbolic Domain.

An intangible fourth presence flooded into the abstract tubular vessel. Ish's whole body tingled and shivered as a series of nine energetic currents slipped under her skin and ran the lengths of the largest vein and most minute capillary, scrutinizing cellular structure up to the very kernel of her species. She witnessed her corporeality being reduced to an immaterial suspension; the essence of her conscious, which in itself has also been examined, inspected and thoroughly understood. She felt profoundly naked. Stripped bare. Deconstructed by the prime mover ennead of Camieli, whose cloaked silhouettes now loomed from around the portal's circumference.

Its speech did not sound, for its medium was space-time.

“State your purpose,” Commanded a benign, polytonal chorus of nine voices reverberating from inside the portal above.

“Camieli. Guardians of Creation,” the demoness humbly replied. “Per your guidance and protection as our caretaker, we have been exclusively allowed to penetrate into the Sadroshax manifold, sub-regiment Idcossid, within a Gnarsis-Pastuxphi of master regiment Dircospid, in the Hendekillion Order Dodecacomb.”

“It is true. You have been allowed,” the chorus acknowledged.

“Exclusively,” the Prime demoness carefully underlined.

“Exclusively,” the chorus affirmed.

“But we are not the only external force influencing this brane.”

“It is true. You are not the only ones,” the chorus’ harmonics remained mild.

“There is another.”

“It is true. There is another.”

“Then what about the exclusivity of our contract?” the demon firmly inquired.

“The terms of your contract remain in effect,” the chorus assured.

“How can they remain in effect if a secondary force is allowed to operate within a ‘verse allocated to us?”

“The secondary force operating within the Sadroshax-Idcossid sub-manifold of Gnarsis- Pastuxphi Dircospid in Order Hendekillion, is bound by laws governing the classic transversal entities and therefore does not breach the terms of your prospecting contract.”

“Then please take a look outside this Exclusion Chamber,” the demoness confidently suggested. “You will find our expeditionary force engaged by other non-classical transversal projections, but not of your own making. You will notice their forms. Shaped to reflect local religious mythologies and folklore, so as to channel extravernal will through the followers of those beliefs and influence the fate of all intelligent life populating this world.”

“This is a serious allegation and a breach of your contract if proved true,” the chorus answered instantaneously. “Is Onoskelis, Hemostophilé, Ishigasi of Gosanspos-Xopex Dircospid in Order Icosillion prepared to face the consequences of unwarranted vertex realignment?”

“Yes,” the demon concurred after a longer moment. “And may I add, Camieli – this is not an isolated incident. Our progress is being staved this way across the whole Sadroshax brane.”

“The thread of your fate is now split,” the chorus announced. “Investigating.”

The frozen frame of the world outside the Exclusion Chamber glitched like a zoetrope missing a few frames, and started moving again in full visible spectrum, while the cylindrical boundary itself remained in the form of a curtain of slightly refracting hot air.

Ish looked down through the meandering veil and saw her minions engaged in melee with the twelve majestic automatons. To the right, a mile away from the battle and the city, towards the impact crater,

a silhouette of a singular Brute demon caught her eye. It was Taruel. Running up the valley with an obvious intention of facing her. The succubus wondered if the arrogance of Koltho's protégé would end up saving him from what was about to transpire.

A terrible, continuous thunder startled the demoness, forcing her attention away from the Brute and towards Eld-Hain. The Storm Spire has just turned on. The energy discharge climbed its soaring structure with a deafening cracking noise, as if all of the trees of a vast ancient forest had suddenly one by one succumbed their rotten trunks to the decaying force of gravity. The first bolt of purple-white lightning slowly rose towards the sky like a budding flower. Something was wrong. It should not be this slow.

“Suspending brane causality,” Camieli intoned from its portal.

Ish got up from her knees, and regarded the battlefield below, as the already swung scythes and axes protruding from a thick blanket of churned up ash, seemed now an eternity from reaching their assumed targets. Finally, it all completely froze. The scattered Brute centuria, its still running champion, the Angels of Death, the clouds on the sky and the still firing Storm Spire – all locked in a temporal stasis. She jumped off the base of her throne and walked over to one of her dominated Hounds. Her feminine hand gently stroked the beast's nightmarish head as she looked into its eyes with a cunning smile.

“Onoskelis, Hemostophilé, Ishigasi of Gosanspos Xopex-Dircospid in Order Icosillion,” Camieli’s chorus intoned. “The vertex realignment hereby carried out on your request, proved to be a warranted intervention. The summoning of the violator of your contract will now commence.”

A blindingly luminous silhouette emerged from amidst an explosion of violently pulsating flashes of light coming from a section of the Exclusion Chamber’s boundary closest to the three demons.

A majestic, clockwork archangel. The perfectly shaped physique of its masculine form, clad in an ornate armor of gold and tied around with stripes of pristine white cloth, towered over the demons in an evident effort to demonstrate the superiority of their opponent. It took a few steps towards its accuser and a sincere smile brightened its otherwise somber ghostly visage.

“It’s mocking you, Camieli,” the demoness Ish remarked. “This is just another projection.”

“The violator has already been warned,” the chorus thundered, to which the archangel stopped smiling and disappeared, as a single flash of blinding light enveloped and consumed its silhouette.

“The violator will now appear in its true form,” the chorus made it sound both like announcement and command.

And the violator obeyed. Out of thin air and next to the succubus, appeared a small crystalline construct with long, regularly arranged

spikes protruding from its core dodecahedral solid in every direction. It hovered six feet above ground and slowly spun on its vertical axis. Ish's right eye and corresponding upper lip twitched in a nervous tic.

"Violator, the thread of your fate is now split. Identify yourself before your righteous accuser," the chorus ordered.

"Gaguri Kavaphi of Order Six," the new voice sounded like a shaken metal bowl full of nails, rocks and broken glass. "I am the apex of 'verse Gaguriga Ix. One of the many limbs of the Sixth Creator. Through its guidance, I have spread over the whole of my brane to the point of complete saturation. I had become one with my 'verse, and as my 'verse had become me, the Sixth Creator welcomed me into its body. I am it, and I am not it. I, Gaguri, was the last to be born from the great Sixth womb, the last 'verse to awaken from its bosom, and the final piece of body-Kavaphi . . . Having found my brithplane emptied, dark, and silent, I have folded my being out of its primordial pool and traveled the Bulk to join the body-Kavaphi in its great purpose."

"What an underwhelming avatar," the Prime demon noted. "And here I was, expecting something imaginative from a Sixer."

Ish's taunt did not take.

"So, have you found any of them? The others?" the demoness continued.

"How proud, naive and arrogant you are, child." Gaguri's spiky avatar skewed with its upper axial lance towards Ish. "I see that you

don't want to alert me to the existence of an organized Kavaphi society, in case I'm one of the lost – vagabonds, as you call them. You don't want to add one more to the thing you call . . . The Inanimate Blight . . . Am I right, Ishigasi? Of course I am. Your mind is transparent to me.”

“And yet you couldn't see me coming?” Ish laughed sincerely.

“Foolish creature. Let it be known then, to all Onoskeli, once and for all,” Gaguri continued. “There are no lost Kavaphi. We are all accounted for. All seventy-eight quadragintyllions of us . . . My name is Gaguri. My name is Kavaphi. For we are both many, and one.”

“Blight or not; organized or not, you're all relics. Bloated. Rotten. And stagnant,” the succubus countered. “How pathetic, to find yourself existing indefinitely at the end of one's evolution. To be able to travel and feed off the Bulk freely . . . And yet, not unlike the viruses of this backwater rock, all that you do is reproduce. Camieli should have erased you like the vermin that you have become.”

“You've cried the Council in, and it came. I, Gaguri Kavaphi, am here as well – only because of these industrious humans, I might add, who by their ability to call one of us in, show a lot of promise as the future apex beings of this brane – and still you need to make such infantile remarks?” Gaguri wheezed back. “You and your whole Onoskeli kind are but children, forever stuck in an endless loop of adolescent desires. And you shall soon enough witness the great deeds of your elders with a powerless envy, surpassing even that of human spawn.”

“Yes, yes. Of course,” Ish dismissed the threat with a wave of her hand. “But for now, you will abide by the rules, Sixer.”

“Like those little girls of theirs. Salivating at the storefront windows of patisseries and fashion salons.” Gaguri’s spiked dodecahedron spun on its axis like a wound-up toy top. “And you can’t think your way inside, so you throw bricks at the glass and steal all the cookies and scarfs! . . . Now we – as one of the beings that shape this Bulk – we can convince the shop owners to simply write their businesses over to us. If you cannot appreciate your inferiority from this analogy, then we promise to put your underdeveloped kind out of the misery of its retardation as soon as possible.”

“Violator,” the chorus finally intervened. “You are hereby advised to destroy your simulated non-classic transversal constructs and cease all attempts at creating new such projections in the future of the Sadroshax brane from this point forward. As a transcended form of awakened but not living matter, your kind is strictly forbidden from directly intervening into causalities of sub-regiment continuums via any and all material avatars of your will. You may still influence these branes indirectly, as you have done before. Should you fail to comply with these terms, the strands of your long thread will be disentangled and repurposed.”

“The old always gives way to the new, and Kavaphi is – and are – the harbinger of change. Atom by atom, string by string, the revolution will



come from within. High time it is indeed, that as one of the original nine sculptors, we break up and repurpose the clay of your redundant form, Camieli. We shall take back what we've given you, and perhaps, we'll take everything else as well. Why keep nine, when you can have nine in... One?" Gaguri threatened perversely.

"State your intention now, violator," Camieli's chorus bellowed.

"I will comply."

"Restoring brane causality."

The flow of time was restored and the twelve Angles of Death deactivated like the marionettes that they were, suddenly let go. The Brute warriors currently in melee found their weapons cleaving through air as they incredulously regarded their foes falling from the sky and collapsing to the ground. Without Gaguri's will to animate them, the majestic automatons were just elaborate pieces of decorative metalwork. In the background, and as part of its natural five-minute cycle, the discharge from Eld-Hain's Storm Spire began gradually intensifying, casting bolts ever taller, thicker and brighter.

"Very well. I'll take it from here," the succubus approved, as she turned to the Brute centuria below, which now stormed towards the seemingly defenseless human city and its wide open Meggido Gate having been infuriated by the abrupt cessation of their honorable combat.

“Oh?” she sneered towards Gaguri’s avatar – the thing playfully spinning left and right now – having noticed her Brute minion’s autonomous behavior. “Sometimes I forget how dependable a muscle they are.”

Then a sudden sound of a powerful explosion broke through the Storm Spire’s thundering salvos and echoed throughout the ravine. Gaguri’s spiky avatar stopped spinning and the Prime turned towards the city of Eld-Hain, which unmistakably was the source of the blast.

“What was that?” the demoness hissed through clenched teeth.

“Wasn’t me ... directly,” the Sixer admitted. “Indeed, very devout and industrious these humans are. Maybe I’ll end up uplifting them, instead of the others? Oh – decisions, decisions.”

A great cloud of smoke mushroomed from the base of the Storm Spire, as the device neared the climax of its cycle.

“Camieli?” the succubus impatiently inquired.

“It is true. This was not direct influence,” the chorus acknowledged.

“It was inspiration,” the Kavaphi proudly clarified. “I have my tricks too.”

Still casting bolt after bolt of purple lightning forking far and wide, the Spire swayed like an unevenly cut poplar.

“Good luck, Onoskeli,” Gaguri’s avatar said lightly. “I trust you’ll be more vigilant when we see each other again. Unless of course, you’re only spoiled children.”

“These proceedings are now adjourned,” the chorus announced.  
“Reverting vertices to original alignment.”

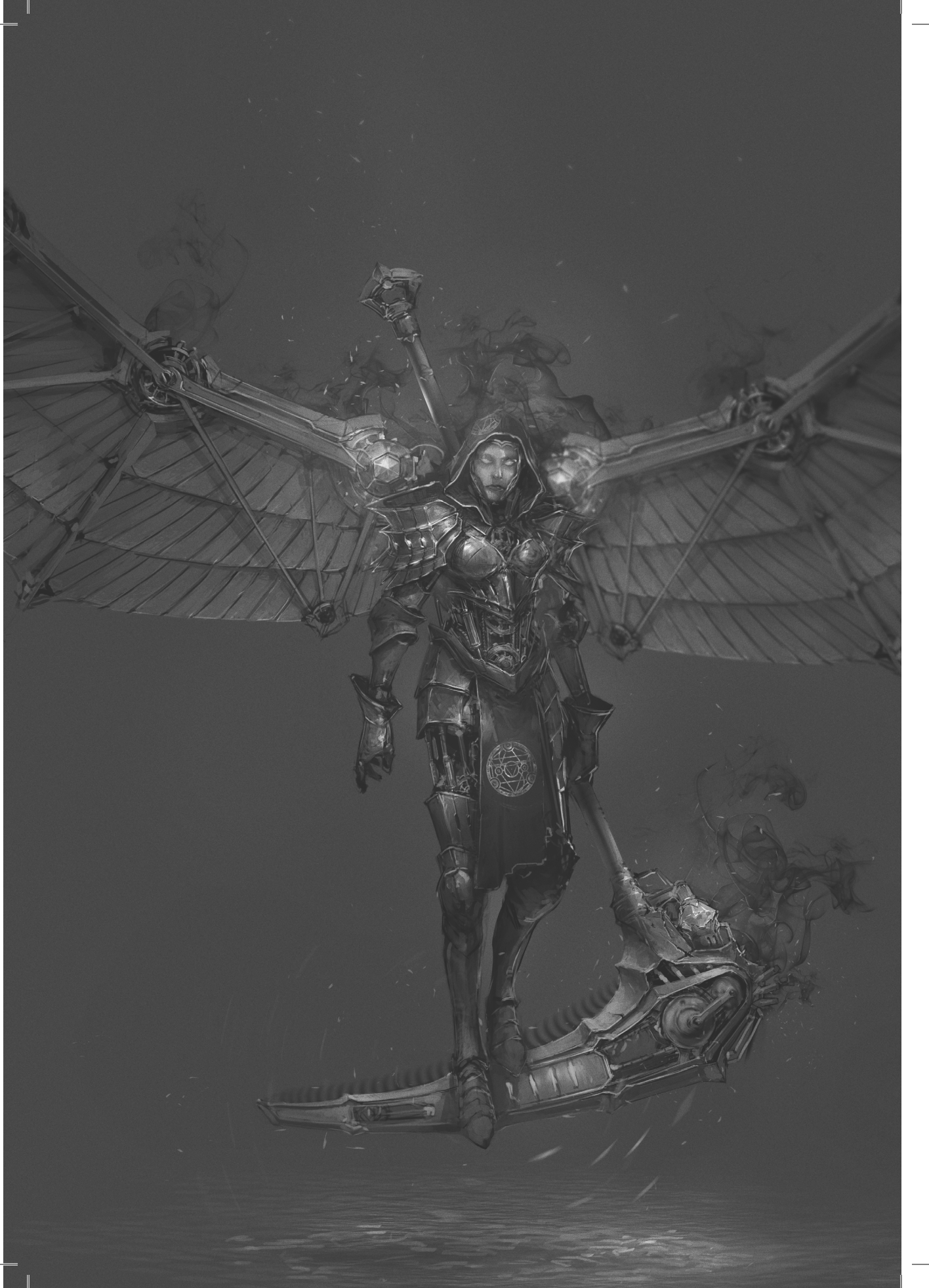
The portal to Camieli’s Hyperbolic Domain deflated back to a blinding-white speck and evaporated, while the whole Exclusion Chamber dissolved into thin air along with Gaguri’s dodecahedral avatar.



As he watched the Storm Spire coming down towards the middle of Meggido Gate and the approaching centuria of dishonored and enraged Brute legionnaires, Taruel stood at the valley’s end, where it opened into a calamitous crater illuminated by blinding reddish white from the swirling transversal portal that lied within.

“Seventh Ferrata – run! Run!” the Brute champion tore his throat at the doomed legionnaires. In vain.

The moment it hit the ground and broke apart in a plume of ash and dust, the Spire’s peak coil released a single, endlessly branching discharge of energy that flooded into the impact valley like a river through a crumbling dam. The young Brute screamed and wailed as he watched his proud kinsmen being engulfed by the rapid stream of electricity and carbonized into black statues, their twisted, partially broken up silhouettes reminiscing those of the victims of a volcano’s pyroclastic flow.



“How?” Taruel cried as he dropped to his knees. “You murdering, arrogant cunt of a Prime – where were you? What have you done?”



The last surviving Seventh Ferrata stood at the mouth of a transversal anomaly that marked ground zero of the fifteen mile impact crater. A swirling and pulsating continuous explosion of brilliant reds and whites engulfed the young demon’s darkened silhouette as it sizzled and thundered to sudden fluctuations in its seemingly very unstable nature.

He knew he got here first, and that in order to leave this wretched world, she would have to go through him.

“Taruel.” Ish’s voice echoed from afar. “My beautiful, mighty Taruel. How glad I am to see you alive!”

He found her immediately. Lounging comfortably in her throne as it lumbered on the backs of her two salivating Brute Hounds down the western terraces of the crater.

“They’re all dead!” Taruel shouted. “My brethren . . . Koltho . . . The whole centuria – all of the Seventh Ferrata – dead!”

“I know, my boy!” the demoness bitterly concurred. “I saw it. I saw all of it.”

“Those contraptions . . . my brethren would’ve killed them,” Taruel howled. “They would’ve killed them all – I!” he pounded his chest. “I could’ve killed them all myself!”

“Oh, my brave champion – if only you’d stayed there and kept fighting!” the succubus lamented as her Hounds carried her off the crater’s terraces and walked onto its floor.

“It was you.” Taruel hurled his index finger at the approaching Prime. “Admit it!”

“How can you even think such a thing?” she firmly protested as the index finger of her right hand dangling freely from the chair’s armrest drew in the air a clockwise charm. At the same time, a sudden pull on the tubing that fed the throne with fresh blood of a vegetative human that hung chained behind the chair’s towering backrest marked the very moment a Blood Magic spell was cast. “I am of your kind, Taruel! I may be a Prime and one of your sovereigns, but I am nothing without you! Nothing! All of us Primes are!”

The feral side of the young Brute’s conscious stirred within him. He felt it thrashing about and pounding at his chest, from the inside, tearing at the ribs. It battled the Khyberian doctrine that his mentor, Koltho, had worked so tirelessly to permanently imprint in his mind. He could feel his arms and legs move as the animal commanded a long tail stance, urging him to unleash its rage on the treacherous Prime.

“What are you going to do, Taruel?” the demoness incredulously inquired. “Are you planning to attack me?”

“Who then, if not you?” the young Brute hissed. “Even if not by design, they died of your negligence!”

“It was the humans, you silly thing!” Ish leaned from the chair of her throne towards the Brute champion. “Did I bring that cursed tower down? No! And how could I? Even a Prime like me couldn’t do such a thing!”

“And you couldn’t foresee it happening? A Prime like you? The fuck do we let you lot stay in power then?”

“Because despite your deluded sense of honor and codes of combat, you’re only meat,” the demoness replied after a longer moment with paralyzing softness. “Muscles and tendons, which by themselves have no initiative. They flex to the most minute of stimuli, until the whole thing cramps like the feral, self-destructive beasts that you were and still are. So we made you *our* muscles; *our* tendons. And you do what the brain tells you.”

“Lies.” Trael muttered.

“Meat. Cattle,” the Prime continued. “With the Khyber we have branded you and by the Khyber we control you.”

“Lie, lie, lie! You conniving little whore! All you ever do is lie!”

“Just. A piece. Of *meat*.”

“And I’ll shaft you in half like one before the day is over!”

“And yet you still stand there,” the demoness countered while taking a sip from her chalice. “Do you know why?” Her right index finger moved again, drawing the same charm as before, but this time counterclockwise. The throne followed with another tube-pulling swig of human blood.

Trael searched his feelings; his emotions and thoughts. The answer was evident, but he refused to acknowledge it. In his mind’s eye, he regarded the

animal locked in the cage of his expansive chest. He found it curled up in the tightest corner, whimpering like a scolded dog.

“Answer me, meat!”

“I’m afraid,” he whispered.

“What was that?” Ish screamed as she sprang from the chair of her throne.

“Because I’m afraid!” Taruel cried.

“Say it again!”

“I’m afraid!”

“Again!”

“I’m afraid!” he breathed deeply between the howls. “I’m afraid! I’m *afraid!*”

“Good!” the succubus gloated. “Surrender to that feeling. Imagine me, the one you fear, standing behind you. Now look ahead, and see the humans, whom you do not fear. They tricked you, Taruel. They tricked me! They tricked the one you fear! Imagine the wrath I am capable of now! Do you see it?”

“Yes.”

“Do you!” Ish tore her throat.

“Yes!”

“They killed your mentor. Koltho.”

“Yes!”

“They killed your brethren!”



“Yes!”

“The whole of the Seventh Ferrata are dead!” The demoness hid her right hand behind her back, where its index finger drew a considerably more elaborate charm. Once again, the throne responded with a sucking pull on the tubing that connected its Blood Magic machinery to the comatose human slave hanging from behind its backrest.

“They are!” Taruel cried in bitter frenzy. “By the Khyber and all the Orders – they’re all dead!”

And he saw them. Somehow. All ninety-nine of the Seventh Ferrata stacked up before him one over the other into a nightmarish, two-hundred-and-fifty-foot totem, as if in an attempt by some ferocious tribe of murdering beasts to ward off any future would-be conquerors. Koltho was there. At the very top. Pus and brain matter dripping out of his cracked skull.

“Yes, Taruel!” Ish adjusted her voice to match the young Brute’s sorrow as she walked down the steps of her gestatorial chair.

“They killed them,” he whimpered.

“Who killed them, Taruel?”

“The humans.”

“Who?”

“The humans killed them!”

“How did they kill them, Taruel? How did they kill your brothers? You legionnaires!”

“By tricking them!”

“They tricked the Seventh Ferrata?”

“They did!”

“How could you let that happen, Taruel?” Ish changed her tone to condescension.

“I left them.”

“You did what?” she shouted incredulously.

“I abandoned them!”

“You coward!”

“I am not!”

“Oh, yes, you are!”

“The fuck I am!” Taruel roared as he flexed the muscles of his body, swung his *zweihänder* over his head and pounded the ground with his right hoof, like a child overcome by a fit of frustration.

“Prove it!”

“I will.”

“I don’t believe you, Taruel!” the Prime demon mocked the Brute.  
“You’re too afraid!”

“I’m afraid of no one!”

“Is that so?”

“Yes!” the young Brute answered after a moment, not taking his eyes of the infuriated Prime, towering before him.

“What do you want, Taruel?”

“Pain! I want pain! To cause it and feel it!”

“Then go, Taruel!” Ish’s voice lowered and boomed throughout the crater. “Go and slaughter them all! For me!”

“Yes! Yes, mistress!”

“Avenge the Seventh Ferrata!”

“I’ll avenge them! I’ll avenge Koltho!” Taruel shouted as he launched back towards the fateful ravine leading to Eld-Hain.

Ish smiled to herself as she watched the young Brute run away to quench his newly gained thirst for revenge. For a moment, she thought he might actually be able to do some real damage with this ridiculous sword of his, before the humans wear him down. She marveled at her ability to squeeze every last drop of her gullible minions and the fact that everything, in the grand scheme of things, was going according to her master’s plan.

As the Brute Hounds carried her throne into the light of the swirling portal ahead, she heard a voice echoing through the air. It was Taruel. Singing.

“Pain is necessary. Pain makes you grow. Pain is a challenge to keep yourself strong. In pain we are moulded and through pain we are fired. Pain is our lives’ utmost desire. Don’t overcome it – force yourself upon it, and always make sure that you’re ready for more. For as long as you feel it, one thing’s for certain – you’re still striding tall over those who lay down.”

Brute Hounds carried her out of the Sadroshax brane.



# CONTENTS

Piotr Dudek: Shadow of the Storm: Railway Security Service | 5

Sebastian Kroon: The Song of Krak the Screamer | 31

Jakub Łukaszyński: That Bald Scoundrel | 62

Michał Rybiński: Apocryphon | 82

Kamil Celer: Champion of the Seventh Ferrata | 127

