

THE ATLAS OF DREAMS

"SO BEGINS THE STORY OF THE COSMIC HUNT. OF HOW WE TRIED TO KILL THE BEAST AND STOP THE SUN FROM DYING OUT, AND OF HOW WE LEARNED THAT THOSE WHO WISH TO MAKE LIGHT MUST ACCEPT BURNING THINGS UP."

SINS OF THE MAKER

EPISODE: 1

DANIEL CUERVONEGRO

DE ARCO EDITORIAL



DANIEL CUERVONEGRO

THE
ATLAS
OF
DREAMS



DEARCO
BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA



The Atlas of Dreams

Episode One: Sins of the Maker



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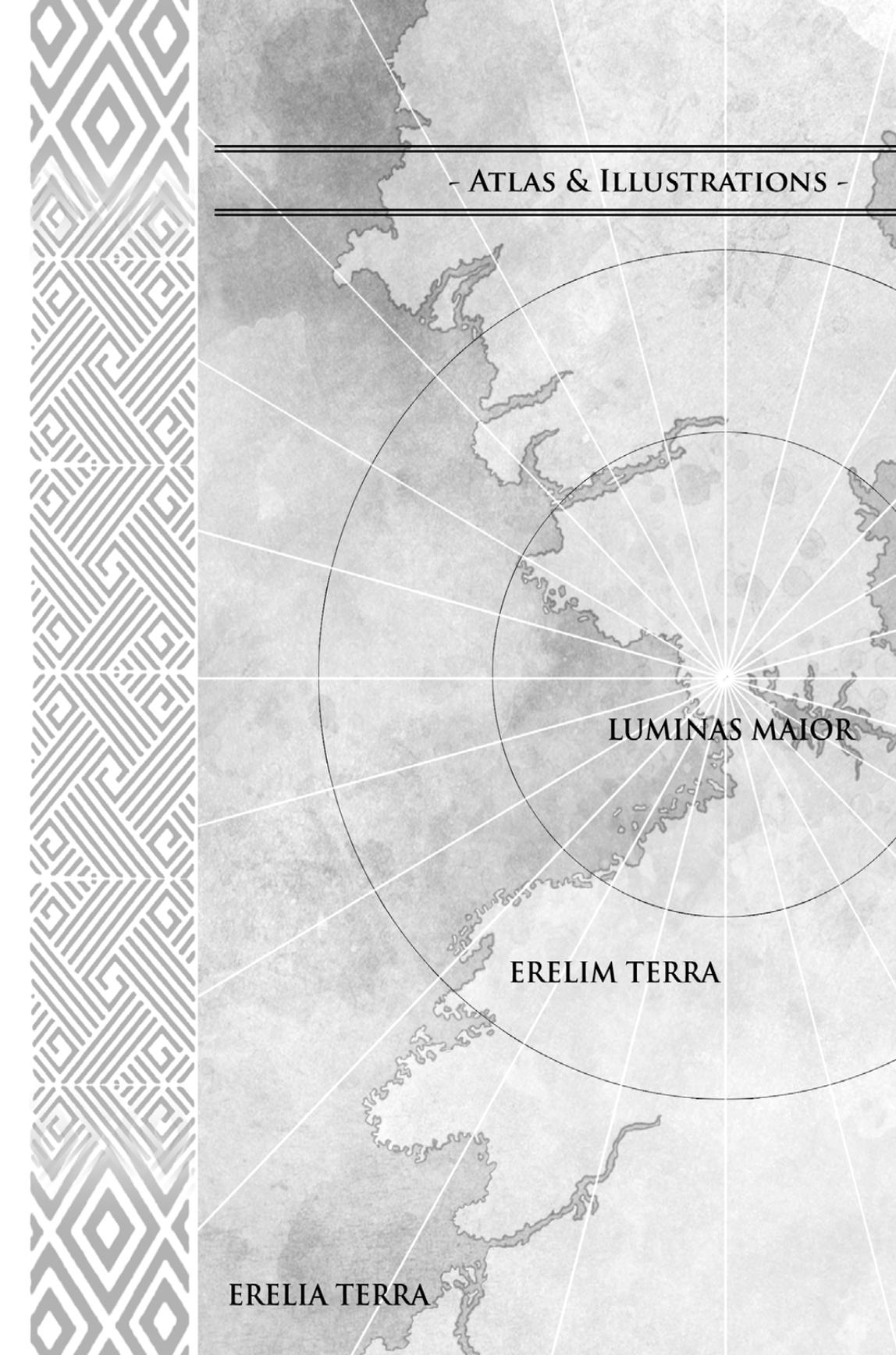
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- ATLAS & ILLUSTRATIONS -



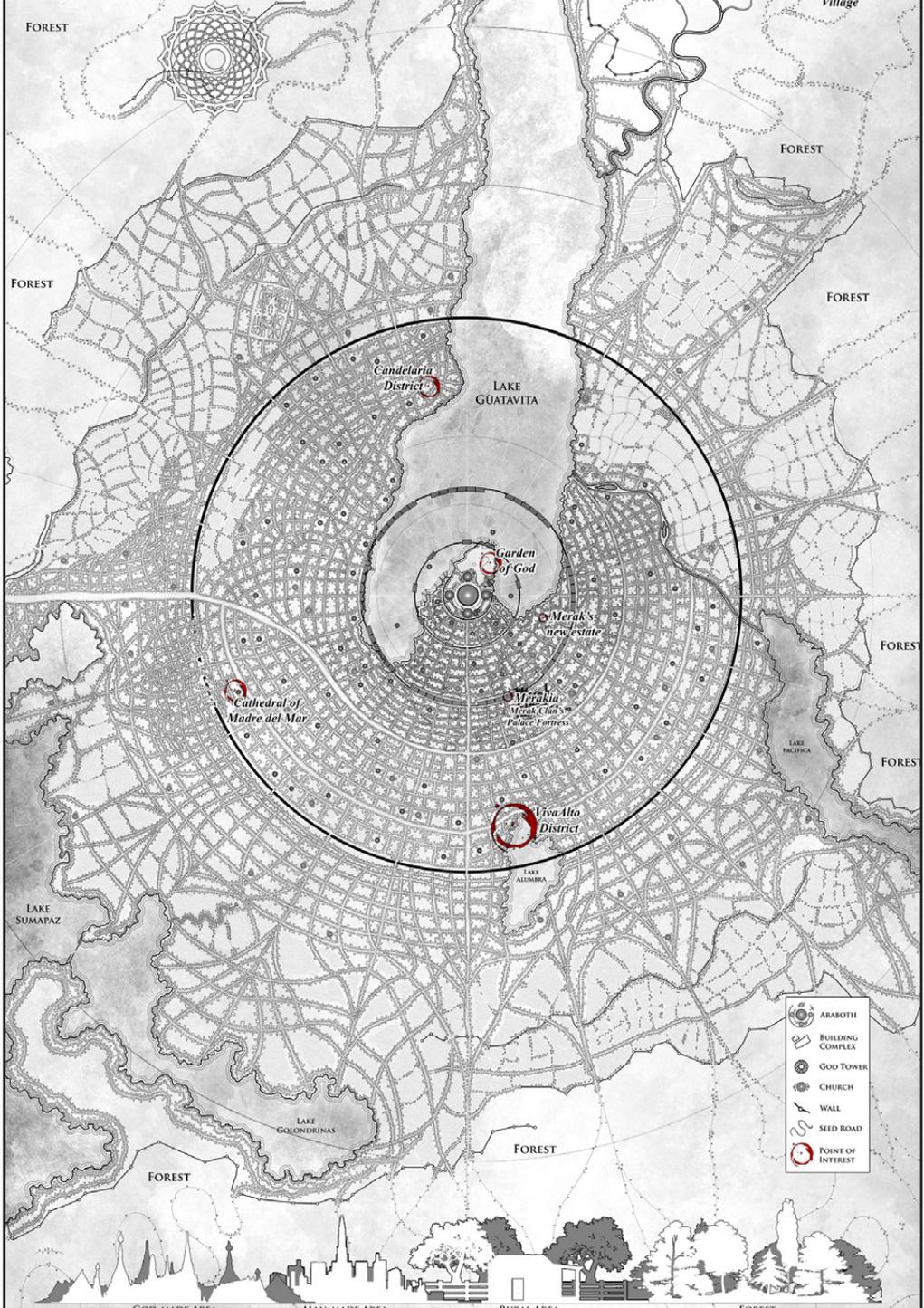
LUMINAS MAIOR

ERELIM TERRA

ERELIA TERRA

SKYMIND

ARABOTH AND THE THREE WALLS



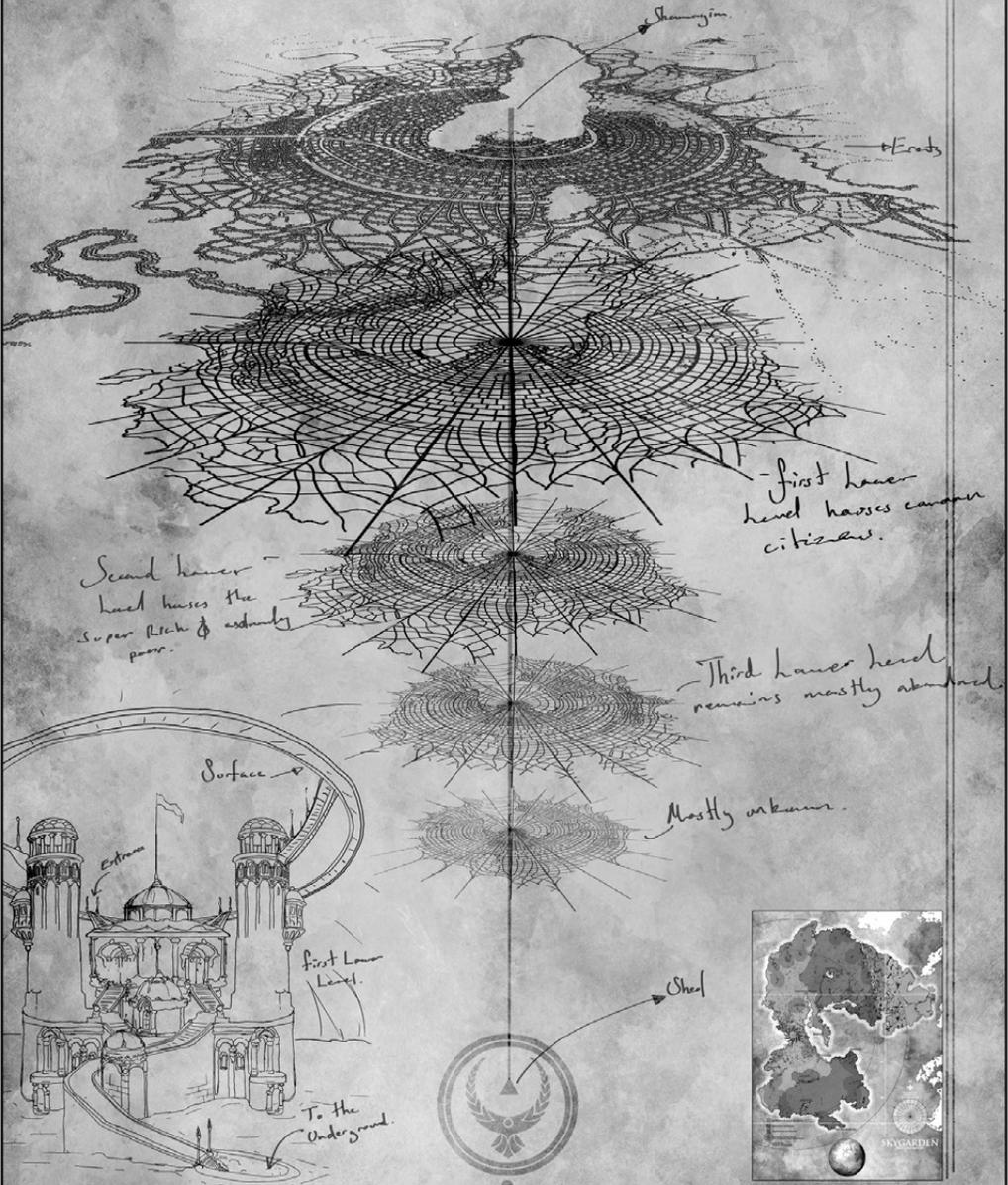
-  ARABOTH
-  BUILDING COMPLEX
-  GOD TOWER
-  CHURCH
-  WALL
-  SEED ROAD
-  POINT OF INTEREST

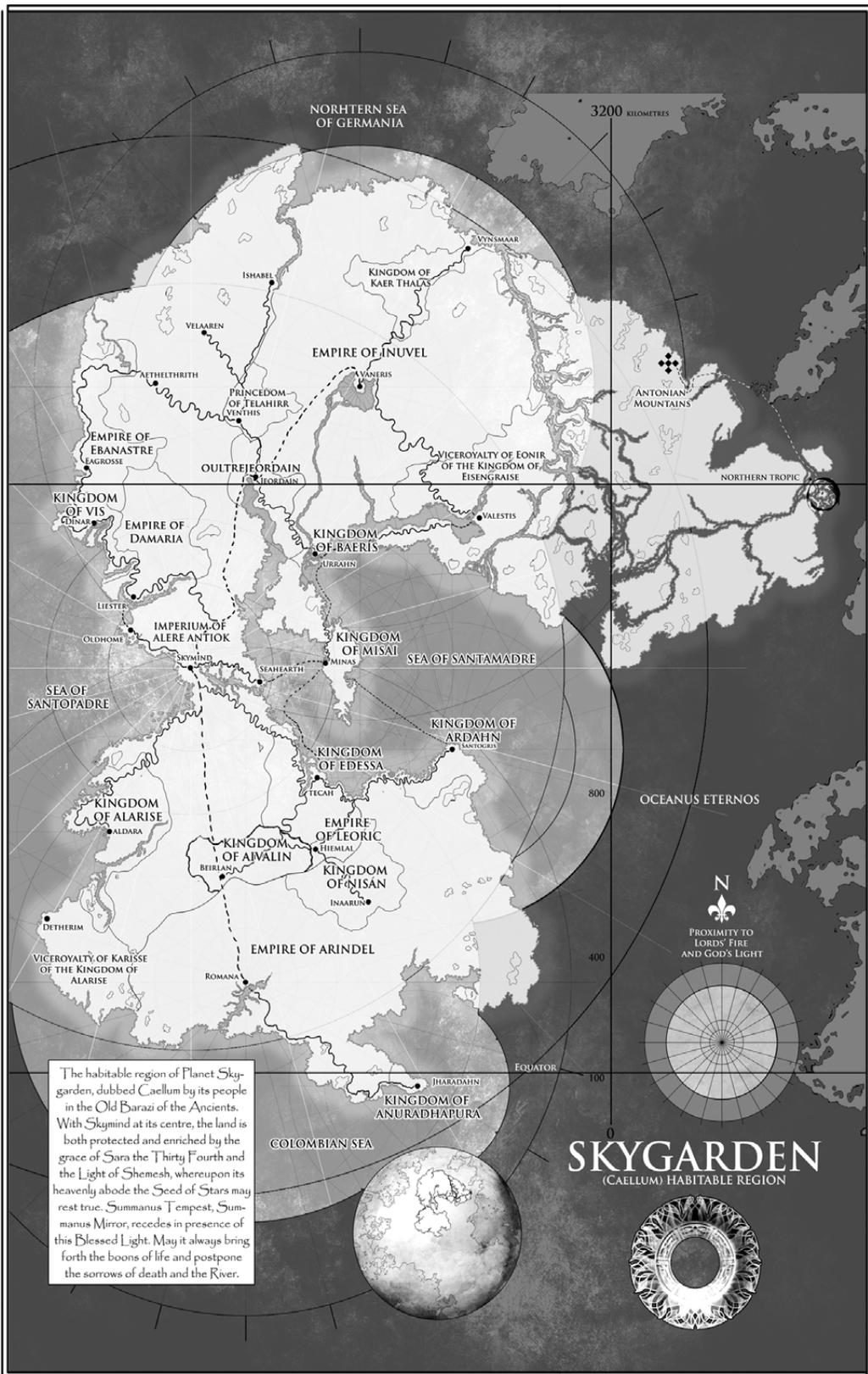
GOD-MADE AREA MAN-MADE AREA RURAL AREA FOREST



SKYMIN D

THE MULTIPLE UNDERGROUND LEVELS





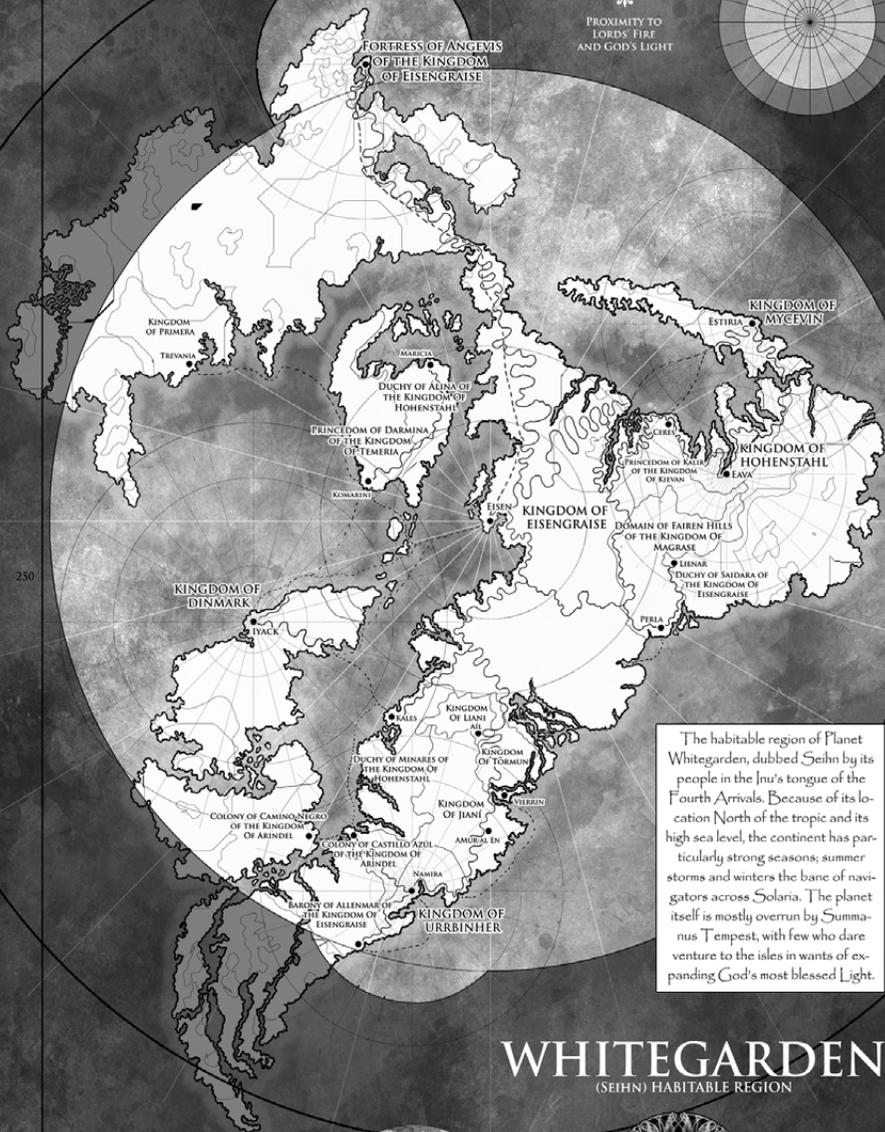
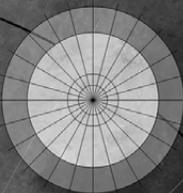
The habitable region of Planet Skygarden, dubbed Caellum by its people in the Old Sarazi of the Ancients. With SkyMind at its centre, the land is both protected and enriched by the grace of Sara the Thirty Fourth and the Light of Shemesh, whereupon its heavenly abode the Seed of Stars may rest true. Summanus Tempest, Summanus Mirror, recedes in presence of this Blessed Light. May it always bring forth the boons of life and postpone the sorrows of death and the River.

SKYGARDEN

(CAELLUM) HABITABLE REGION

500 KILOMETRES

N
PROXIMITY TO
LORD'S FIRE
AND GOD'S LIGHT



The habitable region of Planet Whitegarden, dubbed *Seihn* by its people in the *Jiu's* tongue of the Fourth Arrivals. Because of its location North of the tropic and its high sea level, the continent has particularly strong seasons; summer storms and winters the bane of navigators across *Solaria*. The planet itself is mostly overrun by *Summanus* Tempest, with few who dare venture to the isles in wants of expanding God's most blessed Light.

WHITEGARDEN

(SEIHN) HABITABLE REGION

250

0

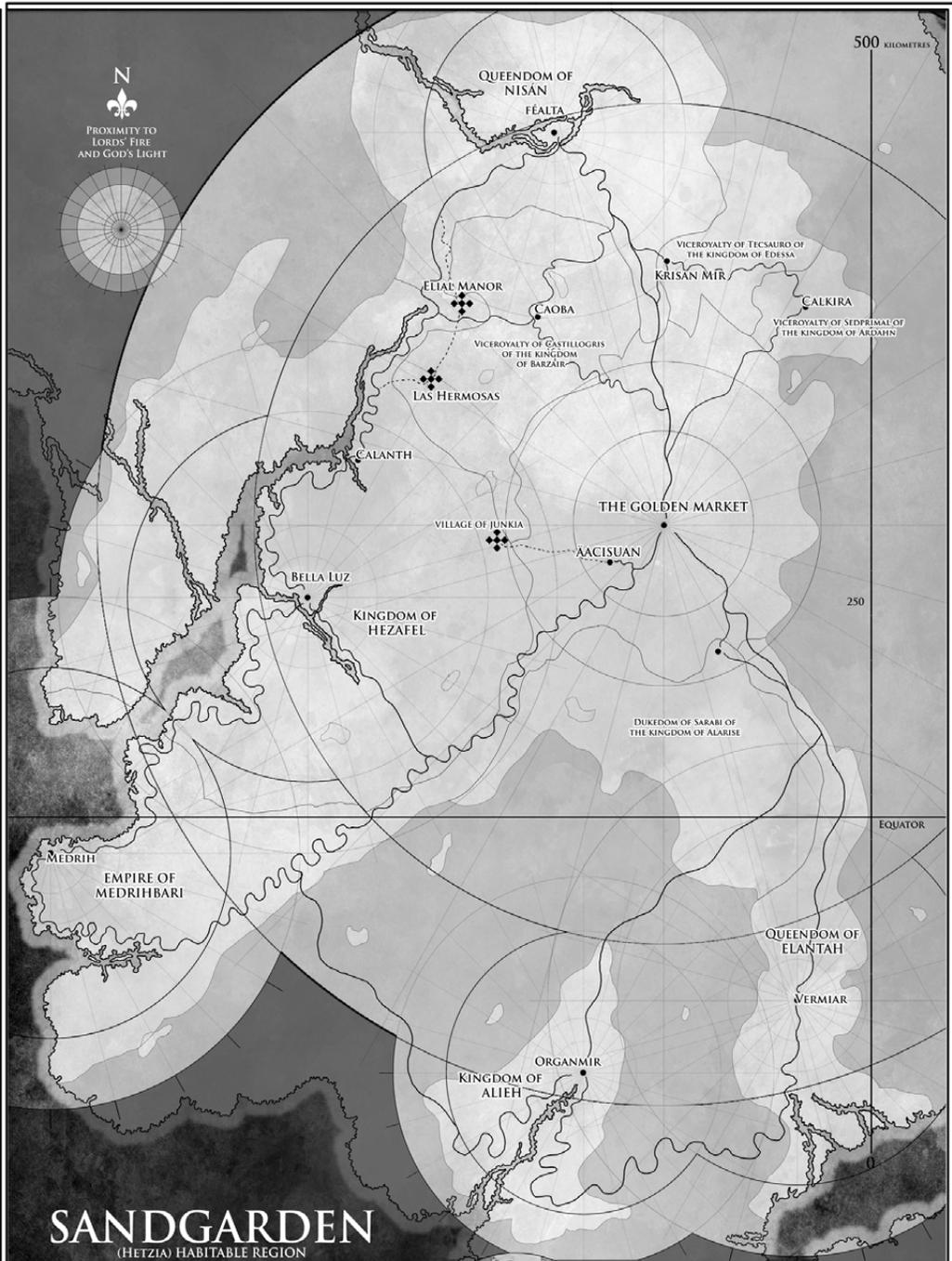
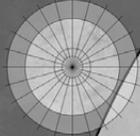
NORTHERN TROPIC



500 KILOMETRES

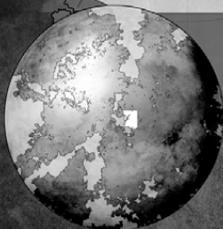


PROXIMITY TO LORDS' FIRE AND GOD'S LIGHT



SANDGARDEN

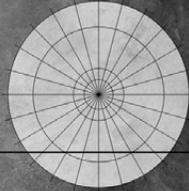
(HETZIA) HABITABLE REGION



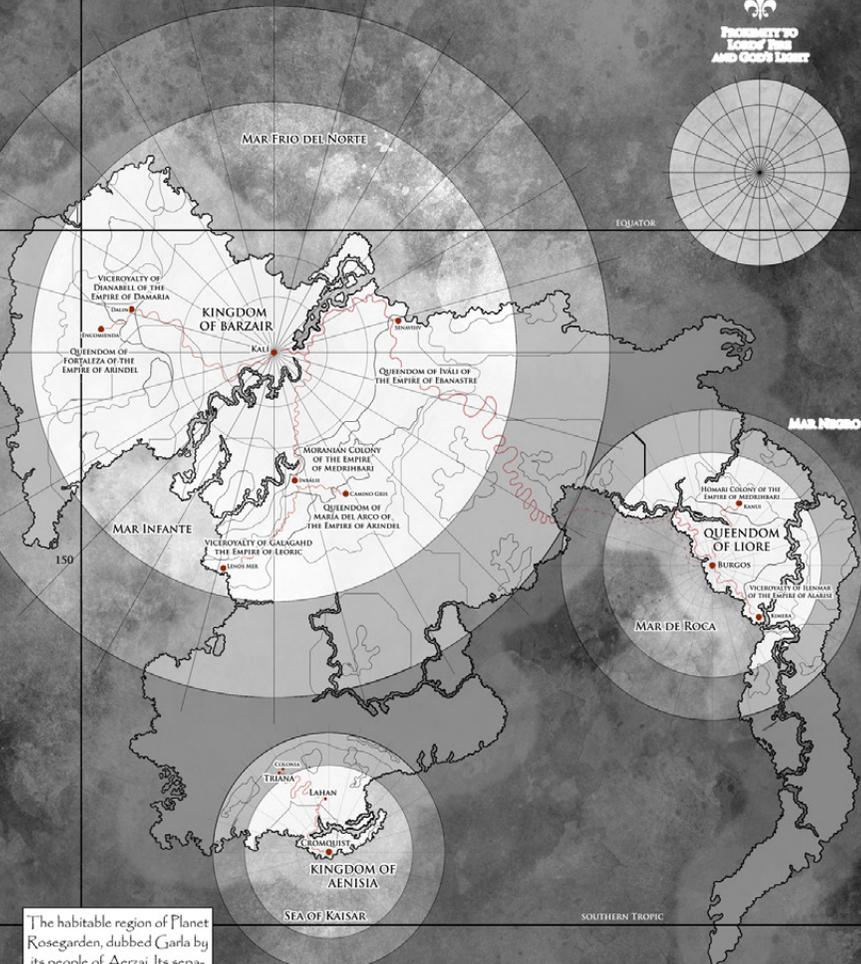
The habitable region of Planet Sandgarden, dubbed Hetzia by its people of Pesares, of the First Arrivals. Summanus Tempest is indomitable in this land, merely a fragment of the planet taken by its people and God's Blessed but faraway Light. May the Lords fix this wound.

300 KILOMETRES

**FRAGMENTO
LOREZ FIRM
AND GOD'S EMPIRE**



EQUATOR



The habitable region of Planet Rosegarden, dubbed Garla by its people of Aerzai. Its separate kingdoms, unable to breach the Summanus between them, suffer so for the beligerent acts that keep them apart, some to Inu others to Arn and in perpetual anger to each other.

SOUTHERN TROPIC

ROSEGARDEN

(GARLA) HABITABLE REGION



0

ARMORIA

RELIC TYPE: CONVENTIONAL



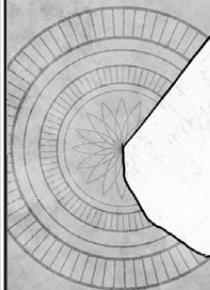
It was Primus Padras,
first to be blessed, that first
managed to use an Armoria for
more than exploration through Summons.
Primus Padras decided to use armour
over the Sacred Skin. This happened
circa 2553 A.T.

Teresa, blessed our warriors armour,
our Guardian's shield, our Sil's
confirmation robe in this,
the day of Wars beginning,
Arise 7, 3397 A.T.

Arms of the Sil, corrupted by the blasphemous
Darkness, blessed one by one by the diligent
Raiders of Anall and the most blessed,
the most pure and divine light of God.

The Armoria serves only to
protect from superficial attacks.
More, it isolates from the
heaven and curses sent on
the sacred Temple by
the horrid Exile and
the damned.

Refugeium protected
under the left flank,
near the ribs, under
the restful arm.
It is required to feed
fire into the Relic.



BASTION

RELIC TYPE LUVIANA OF THE BAT
OWNED BY THE HARRIN CLAN



The seventy four scars found
on the surface of the
Luviana Relic account for
the difficulty in casting
high level Prayers -

Prayer cast including:
First - of Breath
Second - of Content
Third - of Signal
Fourth - of Strength
Fifth - of Endure
Sixth - of Sight

Appendix 37, Dastion of the
Bat, owned by the Harrin
clan since 2742 AT.
Blessed be their blood
and holy name.

-Used in the battle of Aera
by Lord Tana Rowolf Harrin
Lupin, of Danaria.

Originally found in the forest of
the lands of 11 - New Air of the
children of an Empire Alean
Famous, blessed be his name
and grace be the mother of
Harrin, Sogun Harrin, the
Patriarch.



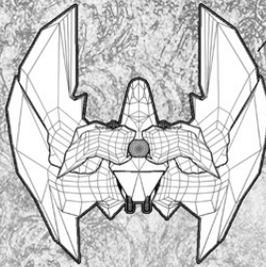
THRONE

SEAT OF POWER OF KINGS

Combat Mode Alpha

For fast paced combat and one on one battle scenarios

Luviana Relic: Category Belshar Thrones. These have a designated purpose as defense mechanisms of the Great Arabeth and the lesser Castles of Solaria

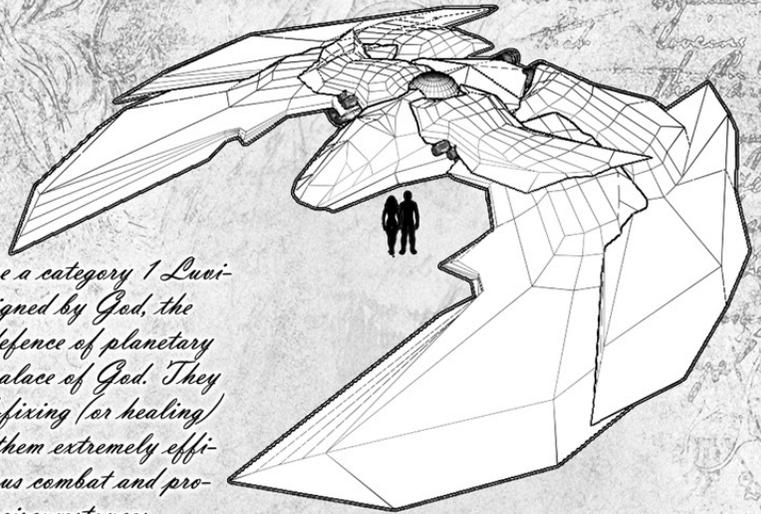


Combat Mode Beta

Best against multiple opponents or large scale battles.

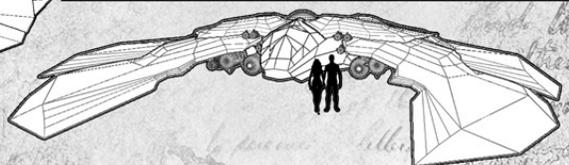
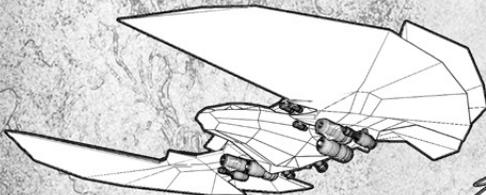
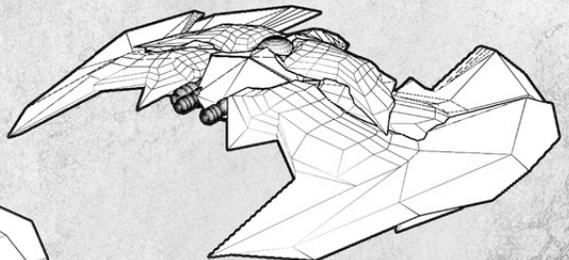


Cruiser Mode



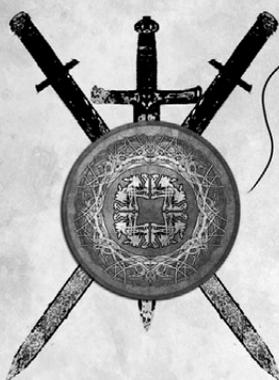
Erelim Thrones are a category 1 Luviana Relic, designed by God, the Maker, for the defence of planetary systems and the palace of God. They have special self-fixing (or healing) sweat that make them extremely efficient at continuous combat and prolonged war circumstances.

These type of Luviana Relics have a One-Core link that enables the user to make direct links to intra or extra personal sources of Energy.



STEEDS

RELIC TYPE: CONVENTIONAL
MODEL, & SIZE COMPARISON



Wister
Rose of
Einsengraesser

Coat
of arms
of the
Volheim
Class.

Steads
must use
this Crest in
combat

Common Steads
usually have
space for
3 in 4

Common
stead combat
Tine

Its electronic
component
will render
unknown

Standing
woman and
man for
scale



THRONE COCKPIT UNIVERSAL ADAPTER ORGAN

Gen Sigil

Control
Stick
requires
positioning

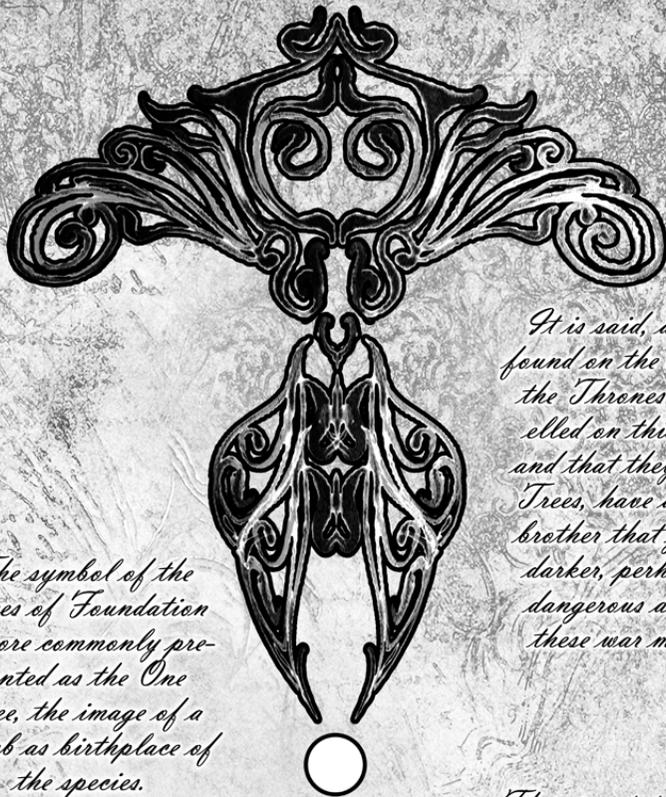
Space for
Eckel

Once established, the
link between the
right screens and
the user can
customize to grow

Common
for Eckel

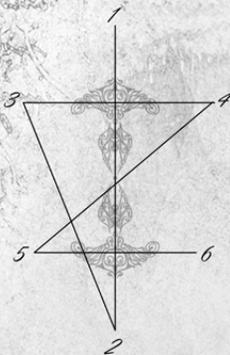
Cockpit
gear





The symbol of the Trees of Foundation is more commonly presented as the One Tree, the image of a womb as birthplace of the species.

It is said, and often found on the Seed, that the Thrones are modelled on this emblem and that they, like the Trees, have a Twin; a brother that grows the darker, perhaps more dangerous aspects of these war machines.



Tree of Life, the feminine.



Seed of Foundation

Theories state that the Seed at the centre are, in fact, two seeds conjoined, each Tree bearing its own Seed. Superstitiously, the Anzil have searched for these Seeds and never found an indication of their existence.

The Twin Trees, the image of the Tree of Knowledge as the root and the tree of Life as the trunk and branches, also emulates the womb and the phallus with the seed between them.



Tree of Knowledge, the masculine



The Erelia are dangerous creatures with powers equal to trained Erelim warriors. They are known as guardians of the Forest, even when this Forest is a vast plain or, as is the case for Isgrinor, a desert.

ERELIA

ISGRINOR WITH ITS PRIDE



Erelia inhabit the Forest, sharing the world with Erelim as masters of their "peoples". Travellers beware and keep to the Seed-roads. The covenant is clear that only if angered will Erelia march into the road or eve attack a settlement. Harm not the trees.



AREA THEY INHABIT

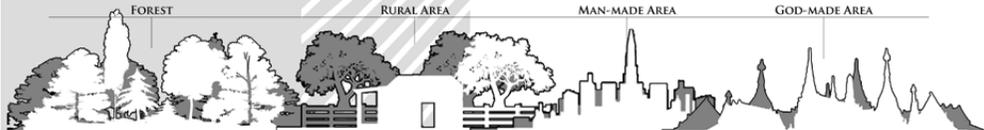
CONTESTED

FOREST

RURAL AREA

MAN-MADE AREA

GOD-MADE AREA



These are the people who die in this story.

Alfeir of Harush, who liked the way drops moved the surface of lakes.

Murien, who had loved so dearly and kissed so smoothly.

Ahanu, who learned how to plant seeds by spitting them just to make children laugh.

Gaadhi, the maimed one with beautiful hair, who loved his mother more than anything and thought of her as he passed.

Naaji, who found faces in the clouds and the shadows of the mountain.

Eedli, who had painted on the walls the name of that girl he liked so much.

Uli, the old, who knew how to cook the river fish and keep men fat.

Quy, who liked to rub his fingers over surfaces of stone and read their stories.

Bageesharawee, who had longed to sit by the fire and tell stories to his grandchildren.

Aderu, the woodworker, who was fond of the colour red and the smell of burnt spice.

Ador, who liked to swim against the river and to sleep in the evening, before the world was cold.

Indumathi, who was known for his deep voice and wide smile.

Priestess Ankara, who stood bravely before a Sil.

Yaemis, who had three daughters and loved them all equally.

Jarameis, who had dreamed of seeing the sea and swim in its waters.

Eliya, who had come to the city in hopes of finding a husband.

Little Hayi, who had always wanted to drive a Steed.

Elh, who hated poverty having seen his mother die of curable illness.

Kneeling Lord Ramsa Lupin, who was friends of Aldemar, Julius and Adolf and who died for the dreams of others.

Ser Emmeric, who lived in the Forest, was fat and small, and a good knight.

Ser Roberto de Cruis, who had trained with the spear, hoping to defend his brothers

Ser Mauricio Carmenz, who had trained with the blade, thinking quick deaths were the better.

Ser Kollens de Garbranzas, who was tall and quiet and who loved his pet mouse.

Victor de La Cruz, who enjoyed playing chess and thought himself clever because of it.

Ser Felip daPortensa, who loved wine and gambling.

Ser Valero Rui, who was, above all, a good lover and a handsome man.

Young Guillaume deRey, who was not yet a knight but son to the captain and heir of his crimes.

Marte Illec Fein, who smiled to the last, hoping the truth of his heart was the truth of the world.

Willa, who loved the taste of sugary ice and bright colours.

The unnamed Exile baby who would have loved the feeling of the sun on his face.

Rodya, who was small and skinny and who liked puzzles and jokes.

Gregorio, the herder, who had lived in the green fields and missed it every day.

Miranda, who was young and pretty and had dreamed of a little house near the market.

Antonio, who was a good reader and enjoyed telling stories.

Primerio, who was young and an eager learner.

Diego, who had always enjoyed the taste of wine with bread and the songs of the women.

Jesse, who was a good chess player and a bad farmer.

Gustave, who had studied carpentry and liked the smell of wet wood.

Nevil, who had loved his wife even as he cheated on her with regret.

Lariu, who had always liked animals best and had dreamed of a life faraway, where it would not matter.

Alvaro, who had wanted to be a Sil and dreamed of meeting one.

Hernand, who had recently learned to love when his wife had given birth.

Carel the herder, recently married and with twins born in spring rains.

Imael the infantry man, once a thatcher, and with two brothers that loved his jokes and silly smiles.

Young Levi, who had promised his mother he would return.

Old Francisc, who liked pretty women.

Pillé, who wanted to be a priest.

Ander, the painter of frogs.

Adriu, who had stolen from his lord Elli and would never pay his debt.

Sergii, the metal bender, and Amille, the apprentice tailor, who had both cried the night before thinking they would die without having kissed a woman.

The Sil of many arrows, who loved his nephew and the colour of the sky.

Alessan, who was too young to know how to carry an arquebus.

Catriano, who had learned to use the spear as a child and now wielded it as an old man.

Dionor, who had carried that little knife with him since his sister gave it to him.

Sandre, who had stolen that sword from a lord and kept it hidden from his friends.

Gesal, who was known for his quick humour and funny lisp.

Camil, who had been a head dresser and liked birds.

Serfan, the ink mixer who was called *Pinkboy* for his tainted hands.
 Meran, who was only sixteen and had once loved the empty blue sky.
 Hernae, the old fisherman who had lost a hand and joked about it with ease.
 Oskr, who was father to a son that hated him and who would never come to apologise.
 Guadel, who had touched a girl and never forgiven himself for it.
 Petr, who had loved to walk by the side of the lake and feel the breeze rising between his legs.
 Serigious, who loved to eat and was fat like his mother had wanted him to be.
 Lozain, who had killed his first pet with a bolt, just to see how death looked like, and had regretted it ever since.
 Fernand Godfrey, who promised never to kill again and broke his oath for the love of the world.
 Gallo, who had been a painter and loved to spend time with women.
 Gonza, from the mountains north, who was too thin and liked it.
 Arroy, who had feared his father all his life and who died saying his name.
 Costia, who had once tricked a lady into a kiss.
 Jeram, who was shy and keen to help and who enjoyed the smell of rain over grass.
 Miguellloh, who was envious and selfish and hated himself for it.
 Amilai, who liked roses above all and thought them soft like her grandmother's skin.
 Garou, the recently born, who would have liked the colour of trees in autumn and merely liked the taste of milk.
 Algen, their friend, who was kind of heart and joyful in spirit and who had liked to spend time with his baby

sister.

Thomas Cander, who had always loved his father and been kind to the cows.
 Aivan Vels, who had been a good writer and liked poetry.
 Saemon Carane, who had dreamed of owning a boat and renting it out.
 Prismos Dul who had recently learned to read and was the happiest man thinking where it would take him.
 Lucah Trieam, who had promised not to kill but also not to let others kill.
 Jileh Gross, who had hidden his savings under his bed for that better day after the war and that wish of marrying

his sweetheart.

Oliverio Cimientos, who had always wished to own a house by the sea.
 Mateos the blacksmith, who had liked the company of dogs better.
 Gregorio the canoe rider, who had loved the taste of cinnamon and wine.
 Muricio del Toro, who had always enjoyed flying kites with his mother.
 Deeter, who loved horses and felt pity for them.
 Harome of the Golden Market, who had been a soldier all his life and liked the taste of cold potatoes with garlic

salt.

Elami of Hasal, soldier of the first division, who always enjoyed his master's lectures.
 Makut, who loved being a father and wanted nothing but to spend time with his boys.
 Siena, who had once touched a Tree of Malak and lost her hand to its heat.
 Guil, who was a fast runner and loved the wind on his face.
 Loel, who enjoyed reading and spending time with his mother.
 Lineus, who hated being a soldier and was just now coming home.
 Kalahd Haisan, who had finally earned his father's respect and his mother's trust.
 And
 Mierum Vins, who was old and wanted only to read and live the lives of others.

To Juani.

PART 1





Prologue

*Ve cambiar el mundo a tus
pies sabiendo quién eres.
Cierra tus ojos solo para
soñar y reír y llorar.*

In all things I felt the passion for power and change, the drama of endless creation through destruction, a theatre of birth and renewal, of love and sacrifice, of death in the name of the perpetuation of life. I came to think of myself, not as a wind of atoms, chaotically whispering through time, but as an almost insignificant part of that majestic process we call existence. I experienced a sense of grief followed by overwhelming joy and felt reconciled with mortality knowing that whatever I am would survive enshrined in a better shape, a new body with a greater purpose, and that my little worth, trivial under the vastness of the sky, would somehow be preserved in the heritage of gods and men. In a real way, the sadness, sorrow and longing of life, the cycle of suffering that oppresses us all, was lifted from me and, where I had seen omnipresent death, I saw now everywhere the vast and glorious triumph of life.

I said yes. We said yes. Yes to life. Yes to a return to the moment of beginning and the dream of one day being as Gods. Yes to the vote of all life to remain living by dying.

This is the story of that vote. Of that choice, to endure and conquer time through the merits of death and the voices of all who live and have lived. And it begins in a simple house where three lived, sharing their memories and dreams. The father was the first to die. Then the mother. Their deaths were necessary. And the baby's. But she should live. She had to, for a hundred years this baby should live. And while she remained safe in her palace above the clouds all would be good with the world.

The bloom of the winter rose grew especially bright that year and died as soon as its petals stared at the night sky. Soon after, snow started to fall and the winds of tempest whistled against the crowns of trees and the summits of great mountains. Their whispers spoke of the arrival of a hunter. He had come for her, for this one baby. He was driven by the great cosmic vote for another cycle before the end. One more instance of savage creation. Life through death. The hunter approached the little house and the beasts howled to the night and when he came inside the man fought and the woman ran.

Holding their baby in her arms and with a dream before her, she ran.

The forest surrounding the cabin was a maze, black and primal, untouched and unknown. It spoke in the tongues of the earth and said: *I promise a return to the moment of beginning.* In her agony she could not hear it. A gulf beat her

to her knees, a prickling wind that took her, seized her to the earth. The snow at her feet was blown away and shards of ice levitated, shy of the ground and all around her. A wolf, shrouded by its white mantle, watched from a ridge, eyes on her and the baby in her arms.

It would not intervene.

This was man's hunt on man, an untouchable rite, old as the stars and of such power nature could but witness and wait. Kneeling, the woman pressed close the gentle body of her child. Her gaze sharpened to a blend of anguish and resolve. Vibrant teary eyes settled between the gnarled forms of trees, like upturned roots, where a shadow cast the hunter's sullen form. There, a man like winter, clad for silence and with clutches of steel, watched. He waited for the mother to understand that there was no other way. It was time. Time and the collective choices of a trillion trillion souls wanting to endure and doing so through her. She clung to hope even as the forest insisted with its subtle roar that death has small beginnings.

Her baby smiled from between thin shivering arms and it was enough for her to find respite and peace. Resigned to the great beauty and terror of life she returned the gesture. She would have given everything for her, the life therein and the world's. She would break it all just for a small chance of seeing it happen, the birth and growth and joy of a full life lived. She would have, but the man was here and time grew thin. He stood over her, hands like claws, reaching, hoping, dreaming of the wondrous things that could be because of this sacrifice. There was great beauty in the mother's resignation. A second wind blew between them, this one from the hollows of the mountain and the forest. It lifted the snow and made the branches crack. It drew the petals of the winter rose with which she had adorned her hair into the dark sky above. It whistled a soft song with a tender voice. The wind was a tune of loss and joy, of feeling and drowned emotion. With it the hunter's intent weakened. Robbed of that precious indifference he had designed in careful memetic voyages for this moment alone, he waited. Human eyes, their shimmer dimming from behind a mask of peaceful terror, bent with shared agony. All life, all existence, relied on this. Still there was a drop of it that was wrong and for it he waited.

She saw him blink. She heard him breathe. He was alive.

He took another step, this one away from her, hands falling under the capes, like veils of white. There were only the noises of the world around them and the cold. A shivering cold that, given enough time, would dim the stars.

Still her baby laughed and smiled and she thought her beauty had given them mercy. Hope. Looking up, all she could see was the hunter's mask, looming over them; a Persona of all things grim. It was a gaunt metallic thing, demonic and calm, as if all forms of terror, fear and anguish, all feelings of hate, wrath and powerlessness, all faces of one who stares at death under defeat, tor-

ture, famine, and time, had grown serene after the storm.

“My love,” the mother whispered looking at her baby. “My everything.”

Having the choice to keep running, to escape and perhaps to live, she chose instead to look at her one last time in the comfort of peace. “Time,” she pleaded, staring at the earthly-coloured eyes of her child. “Give us time.”

The mask turned darker still as the man retreated, the eyes behind it void but for a single teary bead. He nodded and remained still, all sins forgiven.

Time is the ever-recurring atlas of dreams. I give you time.

His voice, deep and warm, brushed against the part of her that wanted to believe. She pressed her baby close with a quiet smile, whispering the words of her failing heart. A single tear rolled down her cheek, turning solid and cold near her lips. She kissed the baby girl with a final farewell and looked at the man.

“Sara,” she said with a fierce mother’s gaze, the word steaming out of her like a ghost. “Her name is—”

*

“Sara, the Thirty-fourth incarnation of God!” the Archbishop Speaker of the Imperium screamed to a crowd, a cheerful audience of hundreds of thousands who stood under the searing light of a warm summer day. When the man raised the baby for all to see the people roared in elation, their eyes bent with mournful happiness, as if they wanted to cry and scream and laugh all at once. Knights knelt swearing allegiance, kings and emperors bowed, and the people prayed, their hands and their hopes united at last with a single echoing soliloquy.

“May she live a hundred years!”

Chapter 1 – God

The body is but one of the things we inhabit, an object in our field of thought. Like we move the world we move this vessel and through the power of the engine we call ourselves. It is distinct against the dark of ignorance and yet entwined into it to cohesion by the soul.

*As written in the Seed of Foundation—
Phase 3, Chapter (300,036): On Our Distinct Origin*

3400 AT

A starlit sky welcomed God in her cradle for a first night in the royal palace of Araboth. Already her Knights of Sil waited outside donning their Armoria under grey ruanas, holding their Bastions in hand. It was their duty and honour to guard her now and to the moment of her parting. They had seen her predecessor and guarded her till her hundredth year and cried with joy at her parting with the eagerness to see her reborn, remade in form and soul, as if time had begun all over again.

“Memory is past,” each man had sworn, “Thought is present,” they had whispered in the great halls of churches and temples, of Forests and deserts, “Dream is future,” they had spoken with a brave heart and the empathy of their kind. “I learn of the past in order to love truly, I love in the present in order to protect the living, I protect the living in order to safeguard the future. Even in death I am as God intended.”

“Thought without Memory is instinct,” one of them said aloud.

“Thought without Dream is Obedience,” the rest responded.

But even as her holy knights stood guard beyond the closed doors to her quarters, one next to the other, their weapons unhooked, they could not notice the visitor when he came in to stare at the restless baby in the cradle. Sara’s eyes fixed on him as if to something entirely new. It was a White Wolf and it had come with the wind. The beast looked down at the baby but it was without hunger. Its eyes blinked, satisfied, and when the girl extended her hand it pressed its forehead onto her palm.

She smiled and laughed.

Sara would never recall the tender warmth that passed through her, like a current, when she touched the White Wolf, but the world remembers what we cannot and truth can wait forever. A thin white ring was drawn in her palm, like a most peculiar birthmark, and a beat, the kind that makes a world tremble, moved through the cosmos. It was a subtle wind, a magnificent touch of consciousness and desire. Of nature and its wisdom. Of life and death.

No one could sense it, for there was none but her who had awakened, yet the world started to change and the galaxy of Solaria would once again whisper, like the forest and the earth, *I promise a return to the moment of beginning.*

With that the White Wolf vanished, as silently as it had come, and so Sara closed her eyes and slept her first night as the Thirty-fourth incarnation of God.

*

Beyond, in the sands of a world usurped by the dying light of elder stars, an ember burned to existence and a small glass seed appeared, a heart beating in its interior and roots of crystal taking conquest of the earth.

Chapter 2 – Wanderer

God's incarnations came to the world unannounced and unnamed for billions upon billions of years since the stars were young to the moment of their first death. Bearing the trials and tribulations of the people, they learned of pain and joy and so determined, as said before by the wise, that nothing happens to a soul which they are not fitted by nature to bear.

As written in the Seed of Foundation—

Phase 7, Chapter (808,798); On the Wisdom of the Saints of Old

3400 AT

His wife waved him farewell with a smile but, deep down, she had to admit that sometimes, when the night was dark and the winds stopped singing, she regretted ever meeting him, and that was true love.

Being an Exile serf had made him strong and quiet, like a young horse that works too long. He was tall, with a pensive quality about him, a posture of feigned weakness, and eyes that stared far, saying what he would not. He had told her of this important day, the most, he thought, since the birth of their daughter. In such spirit, this most fateful day began.

A thin trail grew between trees and widened to reveal the dark of night, reflecting on the town's barricades. He had come before first light to serve a lord and his men. He tended to the horses feeding them molasses and replacing hoof shoes and made rounds serving hot wine with cinnamon to the guards in the wall and tower. He checked wheels in chariots and carriages, and hinges in the castle's doors and cellars. When the sun showed he came to the hangar bay, wrench in hand, to check on the engine in his Lord's Steed.

He wanted to please the man, if only today, so he made sure to check every nook of the tank. Void of ceremony, he disassembled the engine's bottom, straightened the camshaft, checked the spark plug, polished the rotary in the crank and changed the oil. He fixed the flags as well and repainted the hull's crest, deep green and black. Then he waited for the master to inspect the Relic. Baron Alfonse Joria watched from his stallion's saddle smiling proudly and imagining tank-tracks prowling through the mud of another conquered land.

"Let's see," the man asked with a grin and joining palms. A spark and a wilful mental command and the engine roared to life. The glass core at its heart passed his energy to every corner of the machine, helping it breathe and move. The shiver in the ground was a smooth and earthly tremor, almost wanted by the land, and soothing to the ears.

Oil stained hands turned the Relic off with the turn of a handle.

"Purrs like a kitten," the lord assured. "Well done, lad. A fine job. King Ji-deaw's host awaits, you know? 'Tis an important day. A most important day."

The man dared ignore the recognition and sighed thinking it was true.

"I'm talking to you, Exile," the lord spoke louder, drawing his horse close until the smell of its breath struck him. "You did well, unlike your kind. These canons 'll burn God's enemies 'cause of you and what's not made better when set aflame? Its kills 'll be yours to celebrate!"

The man nodded again, eyes on the ground, thoughts anywhere but on who would be the Relic's first victims. After a squire placed one silver coin and two bronze on his palm, a *sol* and a *bur*, he bobbed his head, content.

"Not used to Steeds," the squire teased, "are ya, Exile? You'll learn. All you filth 'll learn soon enough."

"This is a good day," the Lord said, eyes on the tank's frame. "An important day!"

Ignored and dismissed without leave, the man walked silently away. It was, he agreed with the Baron, an important day.

Freemen skimmed down thick roads holding the tools of their trade: ploughs and shovels and pikes. A small group prayed near a Servitor so as to pass unto the machine enough energy for a day's labour while others pulled on oxen or drove sheep down the footpaths. The winds were cool with the whispers of cosmic winter and fiery leaves fell over the mud and puddles. Suns were tired after a year, and theirs, like him, wanted renewal.

Leaving town he came to a nearby village, small and quiet, where his own people lived. Unlike the town's main buildings and underground passages, which were made, like the mountain and the river, by God the sculptor, the Exile hamlet was man-born not seven decades past and without a wall. The Baron's father had chosen the spot, not too close not too far, for the despised yet dependable atheists to settle. It was a small place, with small smoking houses, narrow roads of stone and moss, shallow wells that dried too fast or flooded too quickly, and a silent people who kept to themselves afraid of their own beliefs.

"You must return to your duties before dawn," the council of Exile leaders warned before extending him leave for the day. This would cost them, but the man placed his silver coin on the table between them.

"I'll need the windship," he said, before leaving.

"You going far?"

He nodded. "The lake. There's something I wish to show them."

"Take the horses."

"I'll use the ship or you'll find another to fix it, next it breaks."

The council shared looks. "It's the Zodiac Black, son. How'll you manage?"

"Lord Joria need not know," the man said. "I'll use oil and may he die of silly ills."

"May he die of silly ills," some men added to a subtle choir that repeated the saying as a prayer. "Go, Gabriel. Memories of Brant be with you."

The relief of home brought a smile to his face, but he was not good with joy or showing it. Like always he frowned just nearing the door and thought it best for them that they would learn the stoic ways of his people. Gabriel entered his cabin in silence, kissed his wife, sat for lunch, and felt his child greet him with a tug.

“Are we monsters?” the little girl asked holding a pup in arms, dark-gold, like the tired light of a setting sun. Her fingers passed over the pup’s fur as she rocked him from one side to the other, its eyes half shut in sleepy warmth. “A boy ahorse came riding and told me,” she continued. “He said we should go away.”

He growled. “Leave that,” he referred to the pup in her arms, “and eat.” He dove eyes to plate. It was all he could do not to think of his wife and the burden of their marriage.

Knowing there had been a better life for her at the crossroads she spurred him with an honest smile and that was all he needed.

“Because,” he answered, turning to the child, “we deny what they assure.”

“God?” the child asked, already knowing.

He nodded. “They face fear with comfortable lies. We don’t and they hate us because we choose to see the world on truth’s terms. As my daughter, you’re just—”

“Are we Barbaroi?”

“No,” he answered quickly. “Not Barbaroi.”

“Exile,” she whispered, knowing well what she was. She had probably heard the word more often than her own name.

“We’re Alma,” he said with a nod, and though he had much more to say, he found no way to continue. She wouldn’t understand.

The child dropped her gaze, arms losing strength as if the world had lost its balance. He could almost feel her reaching for meaning in a world without it.

“Listen,” he said. “I never wanted this for you. You’re Exile because of me, but that doesn’t mean— I just needed to... I need to live honestly. But you can choose to—”

“Father won’t tell you what to believe,” his wife said, holding his hand and looking at her. “He only asks that you think for yourself.” The woman looked at the pup in the child’s arms. “Does he need God to be happy?” she asked, petting the dog.

The child shrugged. “He’s always happy.”

“And are you?”

The girl nodded.

“That’s all that matters to us,” the woman said with a smile.

“But God—”

He banged his hand on the table. "Enough with God!" Cups rattled between them.

The fire on the hearth burned, wood cracking as short flames bit into hard fuel. The girl stood still and the man, unable to take a bite, stared at his stained hands, feeling himself ruin what he had promised would be a good day. He dared look at his wife; big brown eyes locked on his. Out of pride he tried to seem angry but her gaze was honest and his frustration weak. He held her hand and all was well again.

"Can I play with Surya?" the girl asked, sensing the spectre of her father's anger gone.

"Finish your meal."

"I'm not hungry."

A moment's thought was all the child needed. After all, he had just told her to be herself. To act on her own will. Before he could refuse, the girl had run away, fearless of her father's reproach.

"I told you not to get her a dog," he said looking at the girl. She was running over the grass with her new friend under the autumn drizzle with the care-less spirit of one who rarely lingers on sad things.

*

Before they stepped out of the windship, a rusted old thing that could fly as high as the forest canopy but no more, he took special care of landing on a flattened surface close to the lake.

"This is it," he said when wife and daughter stood on the mud and stone by the silver waters. "This is home. This is us. I've bought it from lord Jiudeaw. Signed the contract just this morning. D'you remember this place?"

It had been under that oak and by that lake, at an hour not too different from this, in a time when things seemed younger. There and then he had knelt and for the first time, though it seemed impossible, offered his promise of endless love and eternal bond in marriage. Despite the forces acting against them there they stood, looking at each other, she holding their child, he offering them a home that would be theirs alone. A world for themselves.

She shook her head with disbelief, a contained smile puckering her lips as her earthly coloured hair blew in the wind. "How?"

"I fought in the Separatist Wars, remember? I was owed. I'll be a serf all my life, as will you. But not her." The girl, pretending to sleep in her mother's arms, hinted of a quiet smile. "It's been arranged," he continued. "And I must pay a stipend to the temple."

"We'll be in debt?"

He sighed with a smirk. "What could more debt ever do to me?"

"To us," she offered as her only condition and they smiled watching day turn to twilight.

With the hours spent and their child taken by exhaustion they entered the airship, turned the engine on and flew their way back to the Exile hamlet of Colonia.

It had been a good day.

Evening settled turning shades of grey to stark black and the blues in the sky to vivid reds and yellows. Trees dashed beneath their ship and speckles of dust crashed on the dirty windshield. Here and there dust glowed and he realised the year's first snow was upon them. He opened the window on his side and reached out. "Look," he showed his daughter, "it's snowing."

The girl beamed, looking at the flakes of ice as they thawed over her father's warm fingers "Can I?"

"But then you must sit still, agreed?" said her mother.

The child stepped over him and stretched her hand out her father's window, bright eyes staring at the dancing lights as they fell from an invisible place. Her tiny body pressed over his thighs, feet pushing down like he was the world. He felt brave then, and strong, just by holding her. Then she returned to her place taking the pup in her arms.

The dog moaned and settled under her admiration.

"Put your strap on," his wife told him as she sat the child between them and made sure the leather belt held firmly to both their waists.

He growled a complaint. "Checked this thing a hundred times."

When the buckle settled in place she hissed and pulled her finger, a cut on the tip.

"Will you always be this stubborn?" she asked, checking the cut.

Smiling, he took her finger and sucked on it until the blood was gone.

She smiled back, shaking her head and holding his hand.

"You think your father will be waiting?"

"You don't want to see him," she answered, turning away. "Mother's also coming."

"So they *will* be there," he complained.

"You know they will. It's your daughter's birthday."

"Why does daddy not like grandpa?" the girl asked.

"I do," he answered. "It's just that... they're going to stay a week. A week. You know how long that is?"

"A week," the woman answered, mocking him and smiling at the child.

"That's seven days." The girl said, making the number with her fingers.

"I'll find something to do with the boys."

"Oh no, you're not leaving me alone. I need you. And they're your family too."

"So you admit it. They're—"

“They’re old, Gabriel. But they want to see their grand-daughter and there’s something they want to ask you.”

He gave a hundred-mile look, hoping silence would suffice.

“Oh, desist,” she said. “You’re always telling me how much they love me and how they just want what’s best for me. You’re always on their side. What happened now, are you going shy on them?”

“You know I can’t accept his offer,” his tone changed, now both hands on the wheel.

“You’re like a son to him,” she said. “We’re all he has. If they live with—”

“Nothing would please me more. Family should keep together, but I’m Exile. Lord Joria won’t allow it. Being married to you is all that gives me a semblance of freedom and... and I won’t ruin *them*. Not in their last days.”

“Maybe our lord will allow them to keep their brands, and they can help us pay our dues.”

“I can’t,” he said, frustrated as if a shadow loomed behind his thoughts.

“I regret it at times, as much as you do. But in the end, it’s my choice. You let me take it, every day... let them as well. Isn’t it possible that they too don’t want to live like Templar anymore? That they may want to be free?”

“Under a lord’s whip?”

She nodded. “Free where it matters.” She pulled his hand off the wheel and close to her lap. “The Theocracy is no more. The Imperium has been more welcoming to us. Perhaps...”

His head shook from side to side, lips tight as if to say no more. “Alright, I’ll con—”

“Daddy, look!” the girl said, lifting her pup between them.

“One moment,” he said.

“Daddy, his leg’s hurt, look!” she insisted, setting the dog on his lap. “Help him!” The dog whimpered, paws trying to find balance and stability.

“Not now,” he said, taking the pup in hand. He was about to set the dog on the cockpit floor when a loud noise startled him, a crackling thunder that rattled the windship to its core. The sky turned bright when a wave of fire, like a dragon spilling its guts to the sky, rose above the canopy of trees old and new. The ship lost power for a second too long and descended near the road home, bending a corner of the hill.

There, like an iron statue, the figure of a man stood, watching.

Gabriel fixated on the shadow cast and how it stretched under the body of his ship. A man in grey capes looked back, unmoved. He wore a mask; peaceful horror glaring, like the skull of innocence, and Colonia behind him, aflame.

People ran while tanks, engines roaring and escorted by knights ahorse, swerved their cannons to aim, rays blasting houses to shards after thunderous claps. A line of cavalry used spears to strike down the living as their chants

drowned in the foundries of fire. Infantry bore foot-long swords, their blades of light cutting through flesh, young and old alike.

With a twist of his hands, Gabriel tried to turn the vehicle around but the airship stalled, only to regain wind after giving notice to the attacking troops. A knight sat proudly over the hatch of a tank and ordered his crew to aim their efforts at Colonia's only windship. The tank moved its cannon upwards and at them like an arrow in the line.

The windship skidded across the stone road, trying to lift, as his wife grabbed her daughter's arm and pulled her close. She did not cry or scream. Her heart and confidence were sworn to him as she stared ahead, defiant, with the courage of one who knows all will be well. Gabriel had no such courage and sweaty hands were slipping from the wheel. He pulled, as hard as ever and the tank's cannon fired to a close miss.

By fortune he regained control, pulling on the stick and standing on the accelerator. The engine roared, hard as it could, and the enemy insisted. A second ray of cannon fire tried to anticipate him. Gabriel jerked the wheel and started away from collision. It came too close. A third ray would surely hit them.

Fingers wrapped around the wheel with unceasing grip. There was an emptiness sworn, pressing on his immediate thoughts, a thorn in the future. It was as if a question had risen from the earth and fallen from the sky, turning him with doubt. A choice that lingered. Strife and fight or stop, surrender, and look at them one last time. He tried for a smile when his wife's brown eyes met his and then he saw their child in her arms. A part of him wanted the moment to last forever. That part would never leave him and, as he reached for them, arms stretched towards those he loved most, he was forever changed.

A beating shock caught them with a blast, ship breaking with a tremor that spread like cracks on broken glass. Flames erupted and burning winds crawled inside, stealing voices. They tossed and turned, their hands as one until he could hold on no longer. Before he was spat out through the opened window he watched his wife and daughter vanish beyond the bright and searing flames, their fingers reaching towards him, begging him to be stronger.

When he struck ground, with wants of an expired life, he thought the black would remain and he would die. Instead he breathed just in time to see the ship fall beside him. A breath of fire and heat waved through the ground baking bush and moss and bark alike.

He stood, the injuries to his body, the burning flesh over broken bones in his legs, even the shock, somehow ignored by the overwhelming sensation that this could not be real. The inferno blazed before him, warm colours and deep black unfolding towards the skies.

Everything that mattered remained inside.

The invading army barked orders beyond the forest but they had no more

targets to destroy, no more people to kill. Distant explosions echoed and trees were sucked in and out of rushing winds and clouds of black. Gabriel had no mind for that. He ran to the windship and, when the bones in his legs failed, he crawled.

Tears fell as he reached the burning vessel. Engulfed in flames, the Relic seemed drawn in grief, regret painted over its broken frame and scorched interior. Without a second to lose he stretched his arms into the mouth of fire and pulled his wife and daughter from hell. The heat licked at his skin, sweltering flesh over muscle, but whatever pain may come theirs was greater. He took her by the arms, their child fast in her embrace, and dragged them just metres from the wreckage. Choking on his lament he could not utter the words his heart longed to hear. He wept as his hands passed over her body, from waist, to chest, to head, to face, every finger holding her as if to never let go. His fingers, black and red, and white with bone under the embers, could feel nothing, not the coarse flesh of his wife or the streams of blood as it filtered through her cracked skin. Still, he held her like a treasure that cannot be stolen, the part of the universe that was only his. When their eyes met, her head gently shaking from side to side with small quivers of pain, purpose melted and vanished.

No, she wanted to say, *no*. A denial of death.

Their daughter was as still as tears in winter. Her eyes were shut in a deep tranquil rest, hands close to her chest, and her consciousness lost under the soft comfort of a single step beyond sleep.

His wife looked at the child with a choked whimper. Like him she said nothing. The pain of a broken family, cluttered under unknown emotions, could but try to escape into yearnings and longings. She pulled on her daughter, forcing her closer and passed her hand over what remained of her soft blonde hair. She tried once more to speak, this time forcing words through a gullet too damaged by fire and too strained by pain. The sound was a whispering dirge, the kind only a mother can sing. Despite the pain she tried into the words once more and forced her soft voice out, even if there was no meaning to be found.

Gabriel took her hard in arms, trying to find her gaze, hoping what should not be hoped and wishing though he knew it was in vain. He choked on the feeling and searched into her closed eyes, dreaming for a second breath.

Seeing him writhe in terror she stopped him, a single hand on his cheek.

Her eyes, dark and brown and beautiful like the soils of the earth, gazed at him, offering a last smile. He tried to pull onto her, hoping to fill a gap between them that was not there. He pulled and pulled to make his family all there was of the world.

“You’re alright,” he whispered. “She’s alright.” Tears fell over his lips, eyes burning with soot and salt and burned skin. “You’re alright,” he promised again.

She spoke once more, leaning her face closer to his, their cheeks rubbing together, eyes dear, staring into each other, drinking of each other's beauty, breathing of each other. She put a hand over his cheek once more, gentle and soft. It was the sea and the sky, meeting in a place of light and hope, the love that makes all things free, dressing his existence with a gift.

"What?" he asked as she took his hand into hers. "What? I can't hear you. Please," he leaned closer. "What? Please, say it again. Please," he begged. "Please say it again. I can't hear you. Say it again. What?" He cried and his words turned thin and dry. He kissed her but her lips only tried to move, to follow on that final walk. She pulled her daughter closer and shrugged into his arms, closing her eyes.

"Hol... hold me... Gabriel," she said with a final breath. "Just... hold me."

*

He lay there, embracing them with arms of ash and pain and nothing more to live for.

An armed knight, clad in armour, stepped out a smoking Steed. The banner of Inuvel, Empire of the Northern Galactic Quadrant was painted across the tank's hull, a Noble Wolf with bright blue eyes. The knight walked with arrogant pace, like one who is bored, and unhooked a broad, leatherbound hilt, like a sword without its blade. An arrogant smile crept up his face as the fiery steel appeared behind honeycomb patterns, burning out from the rain guard.

"Get out of the way," he sang, coming close. "It's a busy day."

"Please," Gabriel whispered but he spoke, not to the man, but the wind.

The knight looked from above like one looks at a rotting carcass. Honest disgust painted his face with a mocking grin, detestable even to a mother. To him this Exile and the ones he held were nothing, not even an obstacle in a greater plan the likes of which only true men could fathom.

"Please," Gabriel begged again. "Please." He spoke to the lingering memories of a vanishing past and all he thought of were those last words and that sweet voice that had once given him a place in the world.

"Gabriel," she had told him once when his anger turned violent with the transgressions of the Templar. "You carry the weight of your crimes and bear the wings of your kindness. Find peace in me, in us... in you." *I'm here*, he had said. *Always and forever. I swear it's your name I whisper under lonely nights and your eyes I see when I find the world noble and loving.* But she hadn't heard it. She was gone, her eyes closed, face bearing the soft, silent smile of a drying sea.

"Beg, Exile," the knight said, swollen with conceit.

But Gabriel could not. His thoughts were stuck to something that hovered above, like a cloud, like a dream.

"Should an atheist merit God's mercy?" the knight asked, this time de-

manding his attention by pressing the searing fire-blade close to his face, burning flesh.

A moment too short passed them by.

“Damn you,” the knight whispered with impatience. “Call me merciful.” He pushed down so as to slice his face clean off, but the Relic failed and, in an instant, its light had vanished along with the blade. The knight tried to ignite the Relic but its light-blade would not appear. He commanded the Relic over and again to no effect, mental orders failing him into shame. He cursed, but as he unsheathed his knife an eerie whisper forced a chill in him. He dropped it, turning eyes to the dark forest.

A hooded man in steel armour, grey and white of capes and heavy like an anvil in water, stared at him, shaking his head. Eyes of deep blue looked from behind a mask.

The silence that stood between them forced the knight back. And with every step the masked man took one forward until his shadow towered over Gabriel and his family.

“You’re not afraid,” the masked man said, his voice like distant rain. He set his hand, covered in black steel, over Gabriel’s forehead and looked into hazel eyes.

Gabriel drew in his mind the blue behind the mask and the slumbering terror of the man’s fearsome guise. Closing his eyes he let the dark run over him. With all but his life gone he wished this monster would take what was left. Safely guarded by the reality of having secured true love during his life, he was ready to pass as any man should, under the consolation of a life well-lived. Instead, a warm breeze moved through him, as if someone, something greater than himself, had breathed into him and was now breathing for him. His eyes opened and a glow, bright and sweet, flashed from within, white flames rising.

“What are you doing?” the knight asked in surprise, joining hands as if for prayer. “Messenger, they deserve it! Why let this one live? Why help *this* atheist?”

“I want to see the truth of man’s heart,” the masked figure whispered, his voice deep now, but he was not answering the knight. He was talking to Gabriel. “Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. You have nothing left but the power I have given you and a full life to use it.” He took a step back. “What will you do with the Power of God, *Shaii*?”

They left.

Forest flames subsided and the night took again what was hers.

Black and grey returned with the cold and Gabriel was no more. The man now called Shaii opened his eyes and they burned with flame, energy leaping out in cold strikes of lightning. Without realising the presence of this new élan flowing from him, pouring into the world and promising change, he breathed

the night air and stopped his inner sorrow, locking it away in a cage of memories.

He set their bodies gently over black soil, placing wife and daughter to rest, tied in the embrace he would always remember them by. As he knelt by their side to await death, his hands tightly holding theirs, the world grew cold and lonely. It was a place he would rather not live in and it would soon be gone. But something at his back, something that lived and wanted to live, moved and touched his burnt skin. Surprise melted when the wet and cold yet caring touch of Surya's nose appeared behind the dark. The pup whimpered by his feet, setting eyes on him. In a glance and for free he offered the love they left behind.

Shaii took the pup in arms holding him close, as she used to, and cried until he understood that he could not die, nor could he live.

Chapter 3 – Saviour

*If we could not die, if it was an impossibility, then we would search
for a way to do so and find transcendence in its discovery.*

As written in the Seed of Foundation–

Phase 345, Chapter (4,832,571); Death Apocrypha

3401 AT

The sea was angry with stormy winds and the moon glimmered over its surface like a broken mirror. Caelestis Adolf, second son of the Belshazar Clan, waited for news on his mother from a hanging terrace of stone. He was dressed in black and white, golden locks of hair loose and flapping. A pack howled beyond the walls, looking at his figure against the moonlight; blonde mane turned silver, eyes ocean blue. He wondered if they thought of him. He wondered if they could. Trees were black silhouettes waving like rooted birds and the grass was grey under the hues of lightning. To him, the mounds of the valley were like ripples in an ocean of soil and the clouds were the living spirits of the land, spectres restless and alert. Remains of God-machines, the Dormin and Luviana Relics, embellished the landscape.

They had names, these Relics, and Caelestis remembered.

The huge skeletons of interstellar ships buried too deep, rusted and cold, slept in their beds of rock and soil. There was Veltall, with its black frame, resting over Fierge, like a pearl. There was Andari, with its rusted red, and Criscens, with its broken wings. Near the tallest peak, atop the castle, was Xenos, white of frame, polished by the winds. Scattered around these larger Relics, toothed wheels the size of trees stuck out of the ground. Moonlight reflected on them like they were jewels in the black. Upon mountains, valleys, rivers and planetary orbits, in the midsts of fiefs, domains, viceroyalties and the many kingdoms of Alere Antiok's nine Empires, millions upon millions of machines waited for their time to be awakened by the hands of men, like a beast awaits the light of morning. These Relics had lain for so long upon the crusts they, he thought, belonged now to the landscape as much as boulders, trees and rivers. And, like all things God gave the world, like the beasts and the minerals and the water and the rocks, the machines, designed by God for a purpose greater than life, were there for man to use.

And that night they were most needed.

He dared a look into the black halls of the castle. What happened inside, the screams of his mother and her maidens, made him angry, palms still burning from it. The corridors of Eisengraise were dark, rooms lit only by candles. It was the *Zodiac Black* and the air stung with an icy, haunting call. Unpowered, machines slumbered in the gloom. This was the way of the world. For one year

every hundred the cosmos turned dark and quiet, its stars red and dim with winter. God's thirty-third had died and the thirty-fourth was yet to touch the Engine.

During this time only the noble-blooded could breathe life into the machines, and that for a short time and at great personal cost. Caelestis was one like them, a member of an ancient clan and natural bearer of Fire. He felt anything but noble, staring out with fear and regret.

The first sign of his powers came to him after his baptismal ceremony, when he was no more than three. He felt it, standing barefoot over the soil: the coils and veins of underground waterways, the lodes of mineral ore, the scent of distant herds, the sound of the planet and the songs of the wind. They all spoke up in myriad tongues and voices. He had God's Blessing, like any lord's son. But he was weak when others of his lineage were strong. He had been born to a mother without pain and was pulled out from the womb by the healer's hands too quickly. His left eye was injured and there was no Fire in him sufficient to fix the damage. Scarred, it would barely open until he was six when, by the efforts of his teachers, he learned to control his blessing and heal. The eye never fully recovered, seeing half of its pair and in subtle darkness. For that he hated himself, feeling ugly and unworthy. But it was his soft Fire what made him hide and weep.

No matter neither how often he joined his hands nor how hard he prayed, the most necessary Relics would all but twinkle under his care, like stars in the morrow. His failure reminded him of grandfather, Cyrus the Fool: a good man and one soon to be forgotten. And, even though he remembered him often, thinking he should be honoured rather than ridiculed, the old man never knew him truly. Blank eyes had stared at the boy many times and from a young age, but they could not recognize a grandchild, merely a boy he confused with a girl, with long eyelashes and dark golden hair. That old man, he was a spirit of the future, looking at him, learning often of who he was, and yet never remembering. Forgotten even as he lived like one forgets the faces in a crowd.

The morning of Cyrus' death the wind raged against the walls of castle Eisengraise. Intricate tapestries hanging from pillars and terraces flapped and clapped violently and servants said it was the spirit of pater Cyrus what had roared its way out of the castle to leave room for another, perhaps a greater one. Not him, he was sure. He was not like those other lords. Not like his uncles and cousins, who could join palms and see a flock of Relics awaken. Not like his father who, with a blink of his eye could make a castle move and an army of Servitors bend the knee.

Caelestis had been five when lord Cyrus died. That was two years back. Not even then had his father come to fare the old man safe travel to the River or even to claim his legacy. They said Aldemar had lamented his father's death under the stained glass windows and ancient walls of Araboth. They said that

he was immersed in that terrible Fate Art, the Memetic Foresight, and that it had been that, and not his heart, what stayed his will to come. But Caelestis thought otherwise, that he had simply forgotten to look back when he left home for God's palace.

That night, when Lady Montserrat, aunt on his mother's side, came to him, Caelestis knew that once more his father would be absent. Not the death of his father nor the birth of his child could claim Aldemar Belshazar from his place near God. Caelestis sighed with the thought and a sense of loneliness took him, first by the arms and then the chest. His mother was giving light to a third child, a sibling for him and his brother. But there were complications –too much blood, too much pain and the horrible choice between the life of the maker or her creation.

The kitchens were busy but the halls were quiet. Servants had dropped their gaze and dared not look up nor make a noise. The castle sang with creaking steel, whistling winds and dancing drapes, and was warm and void of whispers. Only in a single candle-lit room did people speak with force and anguish.

Inside a woman wailed and cried.

Not three hours back Caelestis had seen the room, stood under its doorway, joined palms to pray and fail. The sight of his sweating mother turned his throat cold and dry. He had run away, as far as a child could, to crawl over a terrace handrail, even as it hung over the valley. In that dangerous place, riddled with petrified cables of Relics too old to stir, he felt like flying and found peace. White petals glided down as his hands moved over flowers and soon he was sitting over the deep; knees high, hands over them, with a lost stare.

"Come," María Teresa spoke, her voice like a siren's chant between the gales. His aunt was not angry seeing him once more sitting over the hanging beam. She was sad and hiding it. "Come, Cae, sweet child. Let's all pray for your mother and your little sister."

Caelestis gasped, for an instant saddened the newborn was a girl. He had wanted another brother but only because it was all he knew. He had dreamed of being to the baby what Darien had been to him, a guide and a good brother. He smiled and nodded as he saw his aunt standing there with an open heart and holding his brother's hand. Darien seemed lost. He had a book in hands, as usual, but was not reading. Instead, he held it like a teddy bear or a soft blanket. Caelestis felt the urge to hug him and as soon as he was down the handrail he reached out and took his brother's hand. Together, they walked to one of the castle's private shrines.

The corridor walls were made of carved stone and steel, their symbols, stories and legends as old as the planet's core. Marble floors were ingrained with images, like pale frescoes under a sheet of glass and habitable rooms were covered in wood made to look like leaves, flowers, critters, and the things of

the world. Books and trinkets of many kinds lay about, even on the quiet floor of the halls where, upon cultured tapestries, they waited to be dusted off and placed back again, never to be used. His mind studied it all, wanting to see it as if for the first time, as if these distractions were the material peace he longed for.

On the way to the shrine, Lady María Teresa de Montserrat had told them the story of the ‘Calculating Prophet’, but there was no more she could say to make them feel better. Caelestis wanted to cry but Darien embraced him and rested his face on his head and that had been enough.

The Shrine was an empty wooden chamber, warm and small and covered in the light of thousands of small candles. The symbol of a tree rested at the end, above the Empire’s crest: the Noble Wolf of Inuvel looking down with sleepy eyes. Lady Montserrat knelt first, then Darien and finally Caelestis, who was already praying, his mind wishing for God to spare his mother. He had to move his skirts and the knotted garlands hanging at mid-thigh in order to kneel properly, but once down all he thought was of God’s benevolence.

“Remember children,” Lady Montserrat whispered, “we must not ask God for anything, but only thank his spirit and her bodily presence for all she’s done.”

“Why can’t we ask for help?” Darien asked, puckering his lips.

“I’ve told you many times,” she answered and closed her eyes.

“I think we must,” Caelestis said, sternly.

“One who asks, dreams,” the woman said, turning to him. “One who dreams, covets. One who covets...” she turned to the tree, joined palms and once more closed her eyes, “...sins.”

Caelestis looked at his brother who shrugged.

Darien would not pray, not now nor ever. Caelestis would do it for both and for his father who was far away, his cruiser cut from them by the Zodiac Black.

“You two belong to the Belshazar Clan,” Lady Montserrat said when the prayer was done. “This is the oldest bloodline in the empire. So you must be strong now. Your people need you to be fierce and noble.”

“Is mother going to be alright?” Darien asked.

“She had to choose,” the woman answered. “And she was very brave.”

“What did she choose?” Caelestis asked, dark ocean eyes on hers.

“Don’t worry about that,” she replied, taking their hands. “What matters is that God knows and she’ll bless your mother good. Sara will do what is right, whether that means your mother is called to the River or if she can stay here, with you, for a little while longer.”

“She won’t go,” Caelestis assured, shivering. “I’ve prayed. I know.”

The woman looked at him, drawing her lips to a line.

“I mean it,” he insisted and by reflex covered his left eye. “Father told me she didn’t feel pain when I was born, so they had to pull me out. I made sure it

wouldn't happen again. They won't have to pull her out, like me! She'll be born good and pretty, my sister!"

María Teresa curled her brows, understanding now why the healers had been unable to stop the bleeding.

"God'll make mom weep," the boy continued, "and she'll be alright. She'll have a normal... umm... um."

"Delivery?" Darien finished for him. "So you made mother cry?"

"Just a little," Caelestis explained, feeling anguished. "For the baby! So she won't be born wrong."

María Teresa took his hand, removing it from over his left eye and smiled at him. She pulled him close and took Darien as well.

"I don't want her to go," Darien said. "The River doesn't exist. It's a lie. A stupid, stupid lie!"

Lady Montserrat did not object.

"It doesn't?" Caelestis asked, pushing away. "Where will she go then?"

"There's a tale in the Seed," the woman said, leaning down and setting her body over the wooden platform as if to sleep. "Do you remember the Seed?"

Darien turned to lie on his stomach and looked at her. "It's God's book, they say."

The young woman smiled. "It tells of the Erelim Moshayim."

Caelestis leaned on his back and stared at the vaulted ceiling, listening to her melodious voice.

"What's that?" Darien asked.

"The Moshayim is a saviour," she answered. "A soul that returns from the River to save those deserving. Anyone can be Moshayim. It's in all of us to become a shield for those we love, but so few decide to do it, it has become a legend."

"And what's an Erelim?" Caelestis asked. "Father is Erelim. But, what is that?"

"Erelim are the kings of the world," she answered, "chosen by God to wield her power and guide men. There can only be one for each bloodline. This kingdom's is your father. When an Erelim is Moshayim he uses his Fire to safeguard others and is as God intended. With such power and such kindness anyone can be saved."

"Even mother?" Caelestis asked. "Can father save her?"

She turned a soft smile. "If God wills it. But she's done her part in this world. There are other things to safeguard and protect. Perhaps you boys can be a shield for your little sister and for your father. Maybe one of you will be the Erelim of Belshazar after him and, if you are Moshayim, your line will be strong and your mother will be proud. Wherever she is."

Darien rested his face on the palms of his hands and started to cry.

Caelestis widened his inner gaze thinking of his father and the idea of being a saviour. He smiled. "What about mother? Can we be Moshayim for mother?"

The woman was resting her head on her extended arm and lifted her face to look at him. Her eyes were sad and it seemed as if she wanted to cry. "You must be strong," she said. "Promise me you'll—"

"My Lady?" a woman called from the edge of the shrine's wooden platform.

María Teresa lifted her body with her thin arms and turned to look at the servant.

"It's your sister," the servant said, her eyes wet with tears. She shook her head and María Teresa held the boys' hands firmly.

"She chose the baby?"

The servant nodded and María Teresa gave a weak smile and closed her eyes for a silent prayer.

"It won't be long, m'lady," the servant added.

The boys walked behind their aunt, steps echoing in the halls of a castle where once they had to shout to hear each other. The door was half open and the light of candles burned inside, bouncing off the tapestries covering the walls.

Caelestis stopped.

"Your mother wants to see you," his aunt said to him.

"She wanted me to try," he answered, scared. He saw the body of his mother beyond the door. Sweat made her hair stick to her brows and there was blood spilling down the side of her bed. A baby cried in a woman's arms.

María Teresa tried to take him in but he took a step back. "Cae, she needs—"

"I promised. I promised her I would fly." His lips were shivering, hands made to fists. Dread consumed him. When the woman tried to take his hand he pulled it away, turned and ran. He ran so fast he didn't know when he entered the keep or how the upper bailey shrunk at his back. The Tower of the Skies swallowed him as he ran, air too scarce to cry between breaths.

He could not tell how many steps he had climbed or how the garden maze looked under the Nocturne Bridge to the hangar tower. His mother's windship was soon before him, on a terrace of stone, waiting under an arras tapestry with her crest sewn in fabric. A single chandelier rocked like a bell, a great tear upon the zenith of their home.

With small hands and thin fingers he pulled the windship's cover away and looked at its black frame and spinning gears. He dropped his cape, placed the pilot's belt around his waist, donned the thick jacket and gloves, set the goggles on his forehead and her pale brown scarf around his neck. It smelled of her. Still.

He tapped on the floor with his boot's toecap, making sure they fit tight,

like she had told him to do, and took the ladder to climb into the cockpit, hands stirring with emotion, head shaking with refusal and something that looked like anger but wasn't. He tried to push the glass door open when he heard a noise at his back.

"Where are you going, son?" a man's voice, round and deep like the sound of summer-storms, rumbled in the hangar bay.

Caelestis found his father, Sil Lord Aldemar Belshazar, Erelim of Eisen-graise, under the archway. The man had arrived shortly from Skygarden, despite the Zodiac Black, though Caelestis didn't know or care how.

"Mommy wanted," he whispered, holding tears. "She wanted me to try..."

"She wanted you to be like the wind," his father said, coming close.

The boy climbed down, ran and sank his face on the man's heavy skirts. Arms like iron fell on him, a soft embrace from a hard man. "My boy. I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"Will she be alright?" Caelestis asked, thinking of the Moshayim.

The man sighed. "*Temperari defectum, sicut Deus in animo*," he said. "Do you know these words?"

Caelestis nodded. "Tempered by failure, as God intended."

"Words of our house," his father replied. "We are made stronger when we fail."

Caelestis started to sob and shiver. "Mother?"

"Your mother has died, Cae," the man whispered, and his voice was like the dying of the wind.

"But I prayed," he answered. "I prayed to God, I swear!"

"I know, son," Aldemar closed his eyes, containing his grief. "Your mother... she now loves you from the River."

The boy looked up at him and shook his head. He turned to the sky thinking of his failures and the anger that burned inside. "There is no River," he answered.

Chapter 4 – Guardian

States, like any other organism, result from the interlinking of units or cells. They evolve by favouring, indiscriminately, their strongest characteristics, their ruling aspects. Without a challenge to these characteristics, to the elites, the state-organism over specialises. Over-specialisation breeds weakness and weakness brings death. In this way, it will thus be explained to God the purpose and benefits of war.
Speaker's Manual on the Upbringing of a God-

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Pride made the walls of Eisengraise and devotion to God defined the man under the *ruana*. Aldemar Belshazar, Lord Sil, brooded over a hill with tall grass and dandelion flowers, while servants dressed the southern courtyard for the funeral. Hours later, Amara's coffin rested over a little mound of stone covered in roses, the sleeping maiden inside. Freeman from the country each brought a feather and had the right to stick it on the earth around the body of their lost queen. Their lord watched on from the foot of his wife's resting place, eyes stern and immovable as a gale took the better half to flight.

Until that day he had been but a dirge moving through empty corridors, robbing servants of their voices, keeping them from their work with a glance and an unspoken thought. He was not dead, but there were some who assured he was not living either, like something important had broken. Aldemar was Erelim to his house, nominal king of a Clan too old and large, counting several planetary domains and fiefs. Most of all, he was Lord General of the Knights of Sil, Guardians of God, and now widow to Amara de Montserrat. But for all his accomplishments he had never been a good husband and, perhaps, that was the greater loss, the missed opportunity to someday be one. *Sometimes some days never come*, he thought.

There was a soft drizzle that morning and thick mists over the cemetery field. Aldemar held the baby, Iori Anastasia, of not two days of age, in his arms and wore that finely knit, yet old and grey, shawl over his shoulders, the *ruana* of the Sil. It was a great honour despite its haggard appearance, its thick cloth in stark contrast to his rank as king. Still, with it, he protected the child, his beard heavy with dewdrops like tiny pearls.

His second son, Caelestis Adolf, cried by the foot of the grave as chosen serfs pushed wet soil over the coffin with their naked hands. In his arms the boy carried a pup, grey-furred with large paws and kind blue eyes. Amara's gift? *Why not*, he thought. She was always spoiling them. His first son, Darien San, waited silently behind him clutching his lips and forcing shivers to wane. Both wore thick glasses, poorly kept, leaning to one side and misty with rain. He gave each a smile and each returned it weaker than he had expected.

Then came the priests and the words and the prayers. The unspoken boredom of the next hours made him stifle a yawn. Few faces dared confess their fatigue, but the Speakers must speak, since they do so in *her* stead. Having heard God's true voice, he was almost ashamed of berating the rituals that kept men safe and quiet. Not all were as fortunate. When it was over, the old Speaker in the white robes turned to him and gave a low bow, blowing away the candle in his hands and keeping the smoke between them; a permission to end things all at once.

"Thought without Memory is instinct," Aldemar offered as a farewell to the mother of his children.

"Thought without Dream is Obedience," the attendants answered in unison.

They were dressed in black, the green of the valley at their feet, and the grey of the clouds above. Envoys from the seven corners of Eisengraise had come, merchants, artisans, freemen and serfs, and they stood on the fringes, obediently bowing with honest grief for a cherished queen lost.

Before them, and holding places of honour, were the lords who knew Amara best. They stood over circles of stone or sat under crimson umbrellas held fast by the wax-like synthetic hands of their old Servitors. The androids, equalised to man by the use of clothing and armour, stood in contrast to the true living and a reminder, to him alone, of the recently dead. Amara's cheeks had turned pale before she passed and her bones would one day be as white as theirs, those serving dolls that made men fat. Lords did not care for what the Servitors represented. They didn't care that these machines were mostly banned in Whitegarden and the Near-realms as tacky accoutrements of the new-rich. They knew they were popular in Skymind and longed for a semblance of recognition from him, the lord of this land, but only if they could look the part. In the far country, Servitors were, still, such a brand.

To show them true regality, transparent power made evident by a garland, he flicked his fingers and made his Ecko, a Relic made to look exactly like an animal, stand. It was Kora, the black lion, its mane long and shimmering under the light. Its glowing eyes made them gawk and smile and then cheer. He felt silly, petty like a child, and ordered the creature away.

Food was served on a long table under the misty clouds and the scarce sunlight, and a grim silence fell over like the stained mantle where men ate and women drank. The commons retrieved to a side, heads bowed while their masters ate, carrying their wooden plates in hard-worked hands. They were given corn patties with purple *chicha*, a mountain drink to keep workers warm, and rib soup with salted potatoes. It was simple but an honour to them to know it came from the same pot as their master's. There was a knight amongst them, he realised, who had refused a seat at his table and instead ate with them. The man was called The Arrival of Birds, from Arindel, and hailed as a hero, worthy

of many a prize and a word from great men, like him. Watching him eat and laugh he envied the man and the simplicity of just being a knight, of just being recognised for grand yet petty things like valour.

Aldemar ate little and in silence, keeping an eye on his children.

In an adult's chair, his son Caelestis looked smaller still; *weaker*, he thought, frowning. The boy was talking to a girl, the beauty Alicia of Harrin who was six and already an eye turner. Focusing his Fire, Aldemar spurred his senses to hear them. They talked of the girl's strange glowing hair and she explained that her mother hated it, covering her head shyly with her ruana's hood.

"It's pretty," Caelestis said, though his words came sad and he wasn't looking. He was trying not to cry. "Your eyes are weird," he then accused, full of spite when he saw the girl's mother clean her cheeks and brush her hair back and under the hood.

"And you're ugly!" the girl replied.

"Alicia!" her mother hissed under her teeth, grabbing her fiercely by the arm. "It's the prince of Eisen you're talking to. One day, if you'd be so lucky, you'd marry such a boy and he'd smack your lips in place!"

"Let her go!" Caelestis ordered the woman. He was gracious enough to whisper it and wise to have set his knife down. Aldemar noticed this with careful intent. The boy could be weak with Fire, but there was heat of another kind inside, and wit. He drew a soft smile, proud of his son, and hushed the Iuvenca at his side, just to listen better at the exchange.

The girl's mother, Empress Isabel of Damaria, had smiled at the prince and offered an apology, excusing her daughter for the transgression. "It's hard to keep a Beautiful One in check," she offered. "They're so... arrogant." The woman pinched the girl in her thigh and her face scrunched with the pain. "She won't scream at you again, will you Alicia?"

The girl shook her head, eyes on him, and almost crying.

The woman pinched harder, this time close between her legs where the skin is soft.

"No," Alicia said in her tiny, angered, voice. "No... my Lord."

"You see," Empress Isabel told the boy, "arrogant little girls."

"Are you her mother?" Caelestis asked.

"I am. Worry not, I'll scold her tutors when we get home. Arrogance is not the mark of a princess."

"Alicia is not arrogant," Caelestis replied, candidly. "She's lucky to be pretty," he covered his left eye, ashamed of the opposite. "And she's lucky to have a mother."

"I'm not lucky!" the girl suddenly cried aloud. "She hates me! She hates me and I wish I were you to have no mother!" Then she was running away as the royal guard of the Empire of Damaria ran behind, her mother scorned to a

hateful wrath.

“Girls,” Aldemar said aloud to gentle the woman in her anger. “I hope mine won’t be as rowdy.”

Everyone laughed but the woman, the boy and him, who had been clear in setting the blame on the parent and not the child just by the intonation of his voice. Caelestis was still looking at Alicia, while her mother faked a smile at him and bowed.

“Yours is a fortunate line, my lord. We’re, not all of us, so blessed.”

Aldemar bowed to the Empress and gave a short look at his son, who seemed concerned, like he could not understand that little girl and her rejection of what he had so recently lost. He took it for weakness and kept on eating with a stern silence made worse by the boisterous lords around.

When the commons had eaten and the Speakers called the crowds silenced once more and gazed at the misty morning giving sway to the sun and the growing heat. The lords of each Clan arranged themselves over stone slates drawn with the birds and the amphibians and the fish, and stared at him with eagerness. Men played soft tunes in the quena flute, the one that sings like the mountain and the condor, and waited for him to turn an eye, a word, a whisper, perhaps, to them. As he thought it, female singers from each royal family came forth in similar arrays to honour him.

Blue eyes, they sang. Blue eyes, don’t cry. Don’t cry or fall in love. You’ll cry when I leave, when there’s nothing to be done. Blue eyes, don’t cry or fall in love.

Yet others watched in queer silence, deeming the ritual an obstacle to their wants. He knew them already, their hubris and desires. Their need for more, their wish to feed on a carcass of historical potential and sociological dreams. *Why must death be so political?* Aldemar wondered, looking at them and their pleasant smiles. Fortune to him that he need not deal with the lot... if he so chose. Holding his daughter in hands and regretting what he had said to the Empress, he walked to the hill’s edge and took a long breath, considering what was to be and why he had come.

Will you leave the Sil and return? asked his brother.

Jacob’s lips did not move but his hands wrote the words in rhythmic motions, fingers dancing, palms waving to and fro. The mute had the decency to frown. He was missing an eye and three fingers, scars of his eldest brother’s rebellion not ten years back, and his face was torn with the weight of past torture and present worry.

Aldemar looked at Iori and rocked her gently, speechless.

I’ll be regent here, Jacob offered, caressing the baby’s cheek. *Until you decide.*

No. No regent. Aldemar gestured as much with his free hand as with the

look in his eyes. “Let the Iuvenca rule in council... for now.”

You mourn, brother. Jacob offered. Your seat needs a master. Headless the wolf cannot howl.

Headless it'll stay, he answered, until one of my children is proven Erelim.

What of my children? Jacob asked. What if one proves so? Need I offer a challenge?

“No need,” he answered sternly. “If that be the case, brother, then Eisengraise'll be theirs.” Aldemar spoke as if reading from carved stone. “You're my brother, Jacob, not... not my rival.”

I grieve for you, Aldemar, Jacob said, hands moving heavily, eyes now on the crowd. We all do, but a people cannot wait and kings must not mourn. Did you hear about the Ormus?

He nodded. Van and Mariana Ormus, last descendants of the Archons and true rulers of Alere Antiok, were being hailed by a growing crowd as the true heirs of God's Imperium. “Adolf has suppressed the rebellion,” he answered. “His remains the Throne and the Ormus are yet to be found.”

Jacob smiled. Found? Brother... I'd say you know where they are, both Van and his little sister. Bet my legacy to it. You'll never bring them back, will you? It's not in the Sil's vision, I suppose.

Not yet, anyway, Aldemar gestured with a hand, bothered by his brother's words. The children of Ormus, if returned now, would destabilise the peace. But Adolf—

Adolf promises to bring them back, I know. When it's right. And in the meantime the stability of the Imperium rests on uneven ground. Sara is so young. So precious and frail. The boat shakes, Aldemar, it rocks violently with a coming storm. The people crave for the theocracy, for the Archons, to return. You cannot abandon Eisengraise without a captain. Not now. I can rule here, for you.

“I told you, Jacob,” Aldemar gave him a quiet, sullen look. “We'll await the Erelim.”

The wounded man turned a grin, bowed to his king, and looked away. *We shall*, he gestured at last.

Grieving for more than the moment, Aldemar offered his free hand to his first son. The boy took it but dared not look. *Only Darien can understand*, he thought, *for only he is old enough to see more than that vacant throne. You see the vacuum, don't you? The will of the people, rising? Will you be my Erelim?* But even as he held the boy's hand he knew there was no such drive in him. He turned to his second son, who stood quietly at the feet of his mother's grave, defying death by staring at its receptacle. Caelestis was fierce, a silent tempest in the wild, and as wilful, but Fire was weak in him. He held a candle where others held torches. Finally, he turned to his baby girl, as sweet and gentle, warm and pretty as her mother. He smiled as she stirred under a heavy slumber. One of

the three had brought him here, one of the children of his blood. The Memetic Foresight had been clear, that touch of future hidden in the cycles of the past. He had felt it and had come. He looked at them again. *One of you... but which?*

“A traveller comes,” said a wise woman in her melodious voice. She was turning north and pointing, her Iuvenca dress waving and a tattooed finger, like an arrow, to the wavy hills against the mists.

Guards waved flags on long poles and shouted against the rain. Distant screams approached and rushed hoofs galloped their way as a man shouted, waving a red bandana and pleading for Audience. Aldemar recognised the falcon at his arm bearing the emblem of Anges in its talons. It brought a message from the castle north.

“My Lord General,” the courier hopped off and knelt before him, gasping for air. “Sire, apologies. Your lady! May the River—”

Aldemar spurred him with a groan.

“I come with news from the border, Sire,” the falcon flew away and the man offered a piece of red coloured paper.

The Iuvenca woman, shrouded in crimson and with a keen eye for detail, took it.

Speak, Jacob signalled at the messenger with his rising chin.

“My Lord,” the man gasped, “Barbaroi at the gates of Angevin. They come in the thousands!”

“It’s natural,” the Iuvenca whispered. “They’ve a year, if only to try.”

“The Zodiac Black is a window to our weakness,” Ser Julius Octavian said, his tone calm and kind. He too had come for the birth of the child and stayed for the death of the queen. As Aldemar’s longest and best friend he had a place near the Clan, despite being Erelim of another. He came closer so as to speak softly. “The dark year can also breed great things, if we’re wise. What more say you, messenger?”

“They’re fighting already, my Lord. At the gates and in the Forest.”

I’ll go, brother, Jacob said to him, placing first a hand to his shoulder. *Your place is here and your leave will expire by New Year. You won’t be able to see your children again. I’ll fight for you.*

Ser Julius moved his hand over Iori’s face so gently Aldemar knew it was but a warm breeze to her. He was a slim man with kind eyes, sharp and calm, and his voice was soft, ever a whisper. “Such beauty,” he said in a soft, modulated voice Aldemar recognised as Sil-intoned. There was double meaning hidden in it.

“Say what you must, Julius,” Aldemar turned to him, knowing the Sil ways.

“We’re not our power in the world,” Julius replied. “Only our time in it. Family matters, my friend. Especially now.”

Aldemar looked at the baby in his arms and at the sobbing children be-

fore him. Caelestis stared at Julius with puckered lips, nodding so gently at the words it made him jealous of his old friend. But more eyes were on him than he cared to count and those mattered too. “Yes,” he said, “but it’s not my presence or my love but duty, Jules. Duty makes family. It’s the love of family.” He turned to Jacob with a nod. “Ready my host.” To the grave-fillers he said, “finish and set the Soulstone without me. Lady María Teresa and my children will stand witness.”

In a second there was a hail and a move for action like a curtain was pulling up and the watchers were silent with expectation. Julius was smiling, but it was a sad thing that never reached the eyes.

“Don’t give me that,” Aldemar whispered in confidence.

“Oh, I agree you must go, old friend. I calculated it too. The Memetic whisper was kind this time. It’s why I’m here... and also why you came, isn’t it?”

“I wanted to come for Amara.”

“Yet you came for God. You felt it too, didn’t you... the change?”

Aldemar shook his head and took a second look at his second son. The boy was still staring, eyes of ocean blue, eager and unbroken. Caelestis wanted him to stay and he would not. So many things more important in this world than the smile of a child.

He gave his sleeping daughter to the Iuvenca Sister and took a step forth.

“The Zodiac Black darkens our land,” he said to the crowds gathering. “Its darkness will not leave us until Sara touches the World Engine at year’s end. The Barbaroi know this and they’ve waited a hundred years for it. Men, it won’t be an easy fight, fought on their terms and with the arms of a past we’d sooner forget. Knights who crave my affection, let me see you. Come and help me show these Barbaroi what flames Templar bear, even while God readies for a hundred years of light!”

In a wave the funeral silence turned into hails of war. Men unsheathed swords and lifted spears. “For God,” they cried, “for God, for God, for God!”

Only Julius stayed back, holding the Belshazar children’s hands and turning small with every cry. Caelestis braved a step closer, removed his glasses and looked at his father, covering his left eye, and trying to smile. Aldemar returned the look knowing what he had to do.

For God, he thought. *And for myself*, he admitted.

Chapter 5 – Soldier

*There was a princess once who fell from the moon and lost her memory.
They say she birthed in us the joy of beauty. They say it, but it was a lie.
There's nothing more cruel than a mother who thinks in aeons.*

*As written in the Seed of Foundation—
Phase 900,211, Chapter (23,789); Moonchild*

3401 AT

When she entered the great chamber past the glass corridor, Alicia Aeris de Harrin did not expect to find so many books. The Belshazar Clan, united to the Montserrat of Aris, boasted of having the second largest Non-holographic library in the Imperium. She had never felt so tiny, not even inside the Grand Oratory, her father's court in Liester. Then she had felt her eldest brother, standing in ceremony and being made a page, to be the most handsome, the tallest and the bravest. He had also felt like the Throne where his father sat, that strange Relic, was the most powerful thing in the world. But this was a library, not grand by volume or power, but by the soft voices she could almost hear coming from each of those millions of pages. The sheer potential in them, she thought without thinking, made her smile in awe.

Her anger, alive and writhing just a moment ago, had vanished. She was in the company of friends. Taking gentle steps near the wooden shelves that rose to the stone dome above, she noticed the light from the clerestories would never touch a book. It would travel across the spiralling stairs and through the corridors, but never near a shelf. She knew this though she could not know or care why. Numbers came to her mind and answers were given without her ever knowing the vital process behind them. It was clear by the angle, the traces of light of bleached wood, the strange arrangement of the windows, that she was right. She was always right when it came to the math, to the logic.

That's what her mother loathed in her.

"Do you like it?" she heard a voice behind her.

Turning, Alicia found her old and grey father, Ioan Eowulf Harrin. The old man came close and gave her a mouchoir to clean her face from dry tears. She took it with a smile. "It's so pretty," she said.

"Do you want one like it?"

She nodded. "Can you give one to me?"

"In my heart it's all I want. You've always liked them. But do you know how expensive each book is?" He took one, pulling it from its place with grave care, and knelt to show her. "This small one may be as much as a million links, or more. Enough to buy a street full of houses and cattle for many winters." He pointed at a small glass room, darkened with exterior drapes. "Those there, I

suppose they are enough to buy our castle twice.” He put the book back in its place.

“Who are the Belshazar? Who was that boy?”

Her father gave a sigh and looked at her, his grey moustache twisting with a smile. He was old, far older than he had rights to be. She was only six and already she knew he was soon to be like that woman in the pit, still and pale. She asked him once and he said fifty-five, however much that was in living terms. Twenty-thousand and seventy-five days, she had known as he spoke. It seemed a lot and yet too few for him who was her everything. Still, he was not as strong or handsome as that man at the head of the table, the one they called Lord General and treated like a king. Her father was a king too. He was an Emperor. A Lord of Lords. Why would he be less than these people? How could he be less?

“The Belshazar, my dear, are the eldest line in the Empire of Inuvel, direct descendants of Inu and protectors of the Alerian Code of Law that unified the Empires. Your ancestors owe their lands and titles to their kindness after the Treaty of Romana in 2932.”

“They are... our masters?”

“Not exactly, but it would be my honour, Alicia, to be such a thing to such a Clan.”

“No!” she exclaimed. “I thought you were the most powerful. I thought you were the king!”

“I am the king. I am the emperor, my sweet child, but of another land. And when an Emperor knows how to follow he’s a greater man still. One day you’ll understand this.”

“I thought you were strong,” she complained, tearing up.

“I am. I’m the emperor of four kingdoms. How much stronger do you need me to be?”

The girl took a step back and looked down. “I wish you were strong enough to protect me from her.”

The man drew her near and his warmth and pull were, to her and in that moment, the precious current of a kind and gentle sea. She took him in an embrace. “Alicia, your mother does not hate you.”

“She does. She hates you too. She says it all the time.”

“If she says so then it’s not hate. It’s just anger. Try to understand her. Hatred is silent, like the instant after lightning, and dangerous. Your mother will never hurt you.”

“She won’t?”

“She’s suffered a lot, you know, being a bastard. She’s the daughter of a union without marriage. She’s lived in shame all her life. Can you imagine that?”

“But she’s your wife.”

“Your grandfather paid me a lot of money to marry her, to spare her a terrible fate in some nunnery where she would be wasted. I needed the money. But she never liked me. From the moment she saw me, old and haggard, while she was so young and beautiful, like you...”

“She does hate you,” the little girl offered, hiding in his robes.

“So what if she does? I was noble enough to save her from an unwanted life, and she was noble enough to give me four children I adore. Whatever else, she gave me this precious little thing,” he poked at her nose with a soft finger. His hands were always soft.

“She loves my brothers. Why can’t she love me too?”

The man took her by the hand and they started around the library. Every time she wanted to speak he hushed her with a whisper. When they had reached the upper tiers of the library she was sure he would speak. But he didn’t. Only when they reached the lower door, from where they had come inside, did the man stop her and drew on the courage of this sacred place to speak to her of her unwanted nature.

“Do you know why your hair glows near the tips?”

She shook her head. “Always happens when I’m angry. My chest too... and my hands.” She looked at them, covered in white gloves given to her by her mother,

“Your emotions make the Fire in you glow, Alicia, because you’re a Beautiful One. The Speakers call it an illness. Fire flows in your body erratically, changing it a little. It’s made you so pretty... but it also means something inside of you is wrong.”

The girl, who was feeling special just a second ago, whimpered and lowered her head.

“As you grow older, with every passing year, your Fire’ll make you indifferent to life. Some Beautiful Ones, my dear, they are not here. They don’t wish to live or die, to do or not to do. They pass the days doing little, depressed and sad, saying strange things and then... and then one day, just stopping. They no longer eat or drink, and then they die. Always too young.”

She was crying now, suddenly afraid.

He embraced her gently. “I won’t see that day, Alicia. I’ll be dead by then. But your mother... she will. She’s young. Too young. And she’s terrified of losing you. She treats you this way, I think, I want to think, because if she grows to love you too much, the loss will kill her.”

But Alicia, who was just six, understood beyond her age, that the hatred came from another place. She loved him for saying these things. Loved him for lying to her. It was the Fire inside that spoke to her, the same Fire that made her beautiful and bright like a firefly in the night. They spent the day together, walking and talking about the different things they found in Castle Eisenraise.

It started to snow and she was reminded that this high in the mountains it was always cold.

They found Empress Isabel sitting on a stone bench, overlooking a garden of winter roses, watching the snowfall over the blue petals.

“We thought to find you sooner,” the Emperor said to her, still holding his daughter’s hand.

Isabel rose and turned, graciously, on her heels. She was twenty-four and beautiful. “Is that my daughter in your hand?”

“Hello mother,” Alicia whispered, hiding behind her father.

“You little bitch. Do you know what you did?”

“Isabel, please,” the man started.

“Now you speak, you pathetic old man? Where were you when this little tyke was insulting the prince of Eisen! Where was your dry voice when others were laughing at my expense?” She came close and slapped him in the face. Then, pulling on her until she was free from her father’s cloak, she slapped Alicia to the marble. Her hood fell over to reveal her dark hair. “You were always such a weak man. Even your brothers think you never were the king! You sad old fool. I should’ve been with a real Erelim!”

The man did nothing. He didn’t budge but instead tried to calm her with closed eyes and gentle words. Isabel slapped him again. When she turned to hit the girl Alicia was standing and walking back, defiantly.

“I didn’t do anything, mother!” she screamed. “I was just—”

“Look at you!” Isabel screamed louder still. “Look at you, you little monster!”

Her hair was glowing bright, a deep blue, almost black at the roots but turning white near the tips. Her chest did so as well, her skin red, her ribcage a shadow within, like she was a wax figure with a torch behind its heart. “I’m sorry!” Alicia cried with impotence, covering her head and neck. “I’m sorry!”

Her father tried to stand between them but caught a third slap to his face.

“Hush, you!” Isabel retorted, lifting her hand for another slap. “I won’t take this,” she pointed at his face. “I won’t bear this! She’s out. Once we’re home this little thing can go live with my father. Away from... away from us!”

“Isabel, please,” the Emperor of Damaria whispered, trying to keep her voice down by lowering his.

“She’s gone, Ioan!” Isabel commanded and, when she was going to speak to the girl, she had to scream it. Alicia was running away like the woman was made of fire and the garden was burning at her back.

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“It’s your fault!” she accused the boy who was playing near a tree by the waterfall. His wooden sword had broken against the bark and he seemed all but happy for it. “You ruined my life and then come here, to play like it was

nothing?"

"I'm not playing!" the boy replied with frustration, throwing his broken sword to the waters below. He was wet with the river's misty spray. He was cold and angry, but her words had frustrated him beyond a brink she could not see. "And I didn't do anything." He looked down in shame.

"Yes you did," she accused again. "You made mother angry with me. I didn't even want to talk to you. You're ugly! Your face is ugly and your mother's dead because you're stupid and ugly and—"

He gave her a push, driving her to the mud. Standing, she took a stick and hit him over the head. Then he was snarling over her, trying to grab her hair and pull it loose one strand at a time. She grabbed his hands and they toppled to the wet soil, tangled in a violent embrace. Crying and screaming like a wounded animal, Alicia took the boy by the arm and bit so hard she felt her own teeth shift when he pulled away. She fell over and he stood, lifting a hand with a rock in it and ready to break it on her face. He stopped and she took the chance to rise with a stone of her own, pulling at his belt and aiming for the chin. The boy's jacket took the better of it, the belt at his waist dropping with the sword it held.

Stepping back he noticed she, unlike him, was willing to go all the way. Alicia was gripping the stone like it was a beating heart and intended to use it. The boy, however, gave a subtle bow, pleading with his eyes to stop this. Whatever it was. He would not say it. He would not speak, which made her angrier still. He just picked his belt and sword and gave them both a worried look. Then, hunched with a weight like the water that fell over the ledge and to the lake many metres below, he sat on a bench and started to cry. It was the image of pity, of abused innocence, what made her drop the stone at last and come near. The boy was cleaning the sheath of his white sword, sobbing between tries to get the mud off from fingers and shirt and scabbard.

"I'm sorry," he said to her, without looking up. "I didn't want to make your mother angry."

"And I didn't want to hit you," she said, sitting by his side. The bench was wet and cold. Everything was wet here, like in the docks of her home, in Liester. There it was the sea and the wind. Here it was the clouds and the river.

"I want one," Alicia told him, brushing a finger over the long ivory carving at the scabbard. "Always did. They never gave me one. They won't."

"My mother," the boy said, stifling his whimpers. "She gave it to me."

"I'm sorry I made you drop it. I'll help you clean it."

"It's alright. I like cleaning it. It's mine. I clean my own things. Why don't you have one?"

"I'm a girl."

He didn't seem to understand.

"I'm not meant to carry one," she said, "because I'm the Peace and you the War."

The boy nodded. They had both heard those words before. "I'd like to be the peace. I hate war. My father's there now... he might die."

"The Lord General?" the girl gave her first beautiful smile. "Won't get a scratch."

"I hope he does," the boy said, angry. "I hope he's injured, like grandfather, and that he has to come and stay with us."

"You hate your father? I hate my mother."

The boy stood, shaking his head and giving her a worried look, like some wind had heard her, like it would take the words to the sky and the great God above, and it was now somehow real. "I don't! I don't hate my father. I... I just wish I had him." Then he smiled, finally and with a sudden pleasure that rattled her to a deeper awareness. "I want to be a father. It's all I want. I'll be a father one day and I'll stay with my wife and never leave her, and I'll have many children, that they be my friends, and... and I'll never leave." He was searching for the beaming light above, that faraway promise he now held so dear.

His smile gave her a soft sense of solace.

Standing by his side she watched as the clouds parted over the distant sea. "I want to be a warrior," she whispered, reaching for that hopeful longing in his eyes and taking a stick by her feet. "I'll never be a mother. I don't want it. I wish I'd be a soldier." Her words had never come so honest. So pure. *A soldier*, she dreamed, *one that can fight. One that does fight, standing in that line and looking at the greatest uncertainties of man with a broken heart yet valorous.* If only she could be what her father was not... and die being it. "I wish I could just... go away." Those words came with so little emotion he knew she had thought it through.

"Have you heard of the Potestatis?" he asked her.

"The wandering castles? They say every Luviana Castle can do it, just lift up, breaking the land, and fly away. I don't think we'll ever see it happen, though. The last Potestates to journey into space was Nova Cantabria, before it settled in Aris-land."

"Yeah," he sighed. "That one was my mother's that did that. The Nova Cantabr... Cantab... That thing. Maybe you could take your castle and, if you want to, just go someday."

"No, silly. When a Castle becomes a Potestates it trades the freedom to journey for its land. If another claims it the land is no longer yours. A terrible thing, my father has told me... and I've read about it."

"You really know a lot."

She nodded, smiling and proud of it. She had always liked to read and

learn. Now she wished she had been out there, in the fields and with a sword. She moved the stick in her hands and frowned with pointlessness.

“I can teach you,” the boy told her. “They train me every day.” He made his own stick clap with hers.

The waterfall was the curtain of noise they needed to finally play and smile and laugh. They screamed in great made-pretence. One was a dragon and the other a man, one dying and the other rising to the greater heavens where they longed to one day be truly happy. They played for a while and then they fought, their sticks clapping in tandem with their laughter.

“Do you think the Archons will ever return?” Alicia asked the boy, holding the stick before him like it was a sword. She was muddy all over, the sweat patching her hair to temples and cheeks. It was glowing subtly bright, visible near the neck.

“You mean the Ormus?” the boy asked, remembering his lessons. “My father says Adolf’s been looking for them. That he wants them back in Araboth.”

“To kill them?”

The boy shrugged. “If that’s the case,” he rushed in, sword high to force her to parry.

Alicia fell for the ruse and lifted her weapon, both hands on the hilt. She would stop the attack and then slash down with the same technique she’d used to beat him thrice already. This time, the boy simply moved one step too close and showed her a smaller stick he’d been hiding in his second hand. It was now at her belly.

“You were letting me win?”

He laughed. “It’s called the Crying Sparrow,” he said. “All the ladies in Aris learn it. My mother taught it to me, to defend myself from bigger ones. She said I’d be small and that I would face very large enemies. I always tried it on her.” He poked softly at Alicia’s ribs, remembering. “She was too tall for me.” Once more came his tears, but these were happy and he didn’t stop smiling.

“I’m sorry I called you ugly.”

“I am,” the boy covered his left eye, removing his glasses in shame.

“Yes,” the girl smiled. “Friends?” She gave him a hug and stepped back, waiting for an answer.

“Friends,” he said, and he too gave her a hug. His was warm and long, an embrace full of innocent depth and candid joy.

She would remember, many years from then, that Caelestis Adolf, the prince of Eisengraise and Aris, had lost a mother, just like her, and in very different terms, and that they, despite their differences, had been enemies before ever being friends.

Chapter 6 – The Saviour and the Guardian

*What truth can be built from lies?
As written in the Seed of Foundation—
Phase 823,902, Chapter (115,936); Those We Inspire*

3401 AT

“The field of battle is the harvest of the seedless, watered with blood. Yet yee shan’t be afraid. Ye shan’t lest you reveal unto thee and the watchers, thoust who cannot remember, that the Sil are Godly. That the Sil are unveiled.”

The boys of Belshazar had heard the words spoken in the stone shrine and over the burning feathers of the condor bird twelve times. Still Caelestis could not discern their meaning, not in the Speaker’s Old Barazi or in his own tongue, as translated by his aunt.

María Teresa held their hands when they left, thanking the Speaker, and taking her time to walk down the stone staircase by the sea. Ocean waters crashed against the cliff as the wind beat on heavy Eisen flags. Aldemar’s royal guard stood in full armour, immovable faces to the chill, their arms unsheathed.

“Will they protect us?” Caelestis asked, looking at the tall men in armour, their ruanas over one shoulder, their shields at their side.

“You’ve nothing to worry,” his aunt told her, eyes on the wet steps at her feet. “The Thirteen are the best trained warriors in the land. Your father called on them for your protection.”

They went through what appeared to be a grand entrance into the mountain. Inside was a corridor filled with rows of candles at each side. The little flames fought against the breeze to keep alight while kneeling women rekindled the lost ones in a ritual of silence and repetition. *What is gone can be remade*, they whispered. Caelestis focused on the lights that waned and vanished in a trail of smoke and on the care with which the beautiful girls set one flame over another. When they left the other side, meeting with the Eisen ladies and the boy’s trainers, he looked at the weapons in the men’s scabbards and thought of battle once more.

“If the Thirteen are here,” he told his aunt, “then who’s with father?”

She laughed kindly. “Well, the Eisen host and his lords. The bravest men on the land. You mustn’t be afraid, Cae. They say it takes as many men as a man can break bones to kill an Erelim Sil.”

“An old saying,” Septima, the spearmaiden said, walking behind them over the muddy bailey. “And a true one, Lord. Your father, he’ll return safely, as rain falls downwards.”

“There are places, master Septima,” Darien interjected cleverly, “where

rain falls upwards. It's because of the wind. I've seen it, by the cliffs of Oragora. Rising!"

"Then it's not rain, now is it? Don't get clever with me. You're still a lad. Much to see. Much to learn. Though I'll see this skyward rain."

Darien smiled and bowed to the old woman. "I'll show you! It's the prettiest."

"What's rain got to do with father?" Caelestis asked his brother, the deepest concern rising from his broken voice. "I don't care about rain. I care about father! Where is he? How do you know he's well? Who's told you?"

María Teresa de Montserrat, Lady of Aris and Nova Cantabria, stopped, her entourage with her. Morning dew had settled over the little things around them; the mossy roof tiles, the tables where men had dined the previous night, the buckets and shovels and pikes on the corner; the leaves and petals on the purple flowers, near the fountain; pearls of water reflected the cloudy skies as they settled on the bodies of plate armour, near the wall, and over the purple bugambilia flowers that vined their way up the southern tower. They adorned all that was smooth and clear and made of wood, metal or glass. Small Relics, placed around the central fountain, seemed alive with a hundred eyes, like the angels of the Seed. She knelt by his side, finally realising his was the deepest concern and that the beauty and wonder of the world was nothing to a boy without parents.

She searched into his eyes. "Cae, tell me honestly. Do you cry a lot... when you're alone?"

He nodded after a moment's thought.

"Are you unhappy?"

He started to whimper, mildly, keeping his strength but unable to hide his weakness. "I... I just don't want anything to happen to father."

"Nobody does."

"They do! The Barbaroi."

The woman smiled and cleaned a tear off his cheek. "You shan't be afraid, sweet boy. As many men as a man can break bones, remember? Your father is the mightiest warrior on the land. He's an Erelim Sil."

"Doesn't that mean," Darien said, thoughtfully, "that we should be afraid? If it takes two-hundred and six men to reach my father, then--"

"Two-hundred!" Caelestis responded, amazed it was so and scared for it.

"If you're careful you can break every bone in a man before he dies and there are two-hundred and six. I've seen it in my books. I've counted. If that's so, then father's the most dangerous person in Eisen. Probably the most in Whitegarden. We should be very afraid!"

"Your father would never harm you!" María Teresa stood, almost scolding the boy with her gaze.

"Of course not!" clever Darien replied, content he had made his logic true.

“But he’s not the only Erelim Sil, is he? Some might be our enemies.”

“The Erelim are loyal to the Imperium, Lord Darien,” Lady Graciela of Saidara said, almost religiously. “The Sil even more so. Every one of them.”

“All of them?” Caelestis asked, his concern waning.

“Of course,” Decard, the arm’s bearer, said, proud.

“No,” María Teresa’s voice came softly from behind the group. They stopped to look at their lady. “No, master Decard. Not all.” A spell of silence settled between them, like every soul had whispered a name in their minds. A name they would rather have forgotten. Qismah Zillah. Qismah Zillah of Feobscura. Qismah who had delved too deeply into the memetic legacies of a species too old and alone. Ol’ Man Qismah, who had seen and gone mad. “You were honest with me just now, Cae.” She knelt again, levelling to his large ocean blue eyes. “I’ll be honest too. Your brother’s right. Not all Erelim Sil are good. Some are terrible. Are monsters.”

“Master Zillah,” Clodie, the old maid whispered from the back of the group. “The Black Snake,” her coarse voice rasped out as if the sound was cursed.

“Dead!” Ser Decard proclaimed, looking away.

“Lost,” Septima assured.

“He hasn’t been seen in years,” María Teresa told Caelestis. “But even if he was,” she pinched his cheek and smiled, “he’s no match for your father.”

Every soul in that bailey that had heard nodded with the certainty of it. Men turned proud to the children of Belshazar and their lords of Eisengraise and the women smiled at them like they held the seed in their hands and its wondrous promise for the future.

No man is match for my father?

He wanted to believe her, smiling at her and his brother. Soon his eyes were on the hall at their backs, the one that led to the great ocean through a corridor of candlelight. The shadows of the girls inside were cast against the grey morning and the light was like the colours in the eye of a colossus; a cosmic whale that stared, whispering the fate of every man. Thunder roared over the horizon and the ocean waters struck the cliff, lifting over the brightened entrance, darkening it, like a pupil.

“But father’s not here,” he whispered. “He’s never here.”

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Wrapped in the cover of his ruana, the worn out thing strewn near his thighs, the old warrior stared impassively. The black lion at his side kept its head high, attuned to the vibrancy of change in the beating winds. The Forest was a dangerous place, a land of Erelia, not Erelim, where the Animal Spirits ruled and where the Barbaroi roamed.

“Sire?” a man called from behind. “You’re certain of this? The Zodiac Black won’t let us help you. Once you’re in... there’s no return.”

“Ser Meria,” Aldemar spoke from above, eyes already glowing with the intensity of his Fire, “have you ever seen a felled tree from afar? It makes no sound. The forest drinks it in. One can only see and then, looking back, you can barely tell where it stood. Even those that were there for hundreds of years, once gone you can never be certain. Like they were never there.”

“Sire?”

“I’m going to fell a tree. Tell your men I need them to circumvent the hill of Aguaceros. Meet Lord Angevin by the lake of Grisa. Eastern shore. Draw them down into the fields of Arrestas but do not face them. You’ll retreat as far as Angevin and into the castle if needed.”

“But—”

“The point, Ilan, is to draw them down and far from their hearth. I’ll reach the Priestess, but only with your help. Don’t think yourselves useless. Your retreat will open the gates to me. Do you understand?”

“But the danger, Sire! Is it worth the risk? We can go with you. We can fight!”

“What we’re trying to do, Ser Ilan, is not win a battle. That is given to us by God. Our pursuit is grander still, that this will not happen again for a thousand years or more.”

Erelim Sil Cloud One turned to the men, eyes on captain Meria. She had a beautiful form, features cast in porcelain and white like river stones. Her eyes were large and full with feeling, like they cared for the pains of the world and her cheeks were still round with youth. Though her shoulders were too narrow for a knight’s and her fingers too subtle for a Bastion, there was naught to fear. She didn’t draw her strength from them but the Fire in her Erelim veins. “We’re to show them, Ser Meria,” she explained in a soft voice, “that the power we bear, even during a Zodiac Black, cannot be challenged. The less your men fight the more they’ll fear us, for they’ll see we’re not obscured by darkness but bring our own light from within.”

It was a poetic way to put it, a Sil’s way. The Speakers of the Arabethian academy taught the Sil to speak thusly, to inspire with the inflection and the words that moved man’s souls.

“Will you trust us?” Aldemar asked, not wanting to give the direct order. He knew men were moved more and better through their own convictions. He needed that now.

“Yes, Sire,” Ser Meria took a deep bow. Knights behind him were kneeling before their lord, honoured and in awe of his valour. The Erelim Sil would travel with the lion-like Ecko called Kora into the deeper Forest. They would hunt and kill Priestess Ankara, the Barbaroi’s head, and do it in such a way her choice to attack Angevin would never muster back. They marched down the hill of Lumviarre and through the frozen marsh of Calud, where it was said

a wrong step would cast you into the mouth of a freezing mud no one could escape from. The miasma released would kill you if not the rot at your skin. Easy and subtle steps over the thin ice carried them along the shadow of the hills of Carestes, which kept the marshes cold even in summer. It was the only safe route north. The only one to fool the Barbaroi. Even their best would never challenge the marshes of Calud and up Carestes, where the Erelia Banthas slumbered.

“Cloud,” he called on his lieutenant. “Confirm my calculations. I’d rather not fail this time.”

“You’ve never failed before, Lord,” she said, joining her palms. Light gathered between them as her Fire joined with his. “Your sight is like the Mother Superior’s.”

“Never like hers,” he smiled. “But I’ll take the compliment.”

She waited a while, waited for the numbers to settle, the memories condensing into coalesced thoughts. She could almost spell her lord’s equation and its results, a form of memetic vision she had never learned and probably never would. Aldemar Black Lion, Lord of Horses, could create, in a single instant and with abstruse methods, a vision of the distant past so accurate it could emulate a near future. He could compile upon compilations of millions, perhaps even billions of historical iterations, and tell, almost to a certainty, what would be and how. She was looking at it now, feeling it course through her veins, the Fire that carried such dreams. She did it, most of all, just to see it, to be warmed inside with his vision. It was, at first, a beautiful thing that slowly shaped itself into a terrifying calamity. And it was all made by choices. Choices that would breed reality.

“It’s perfect,” she said, consoled by its power. “I can almost feel myself in it.”

“Should we go further? Should we do... worse?”

She seemed uneasy answering him. “This region... it’s not as primitive as others. Its thought structures can only find tension in primitive methods, alas they need not be so crude. But.. you know best, Lord.”

He nodded. “A little less and we risk the lesson unlearned. Many must die, and brutally. It’s not our choice, Cloud, if that makes you feel better. It’s on par with their nature. The state of their memories and thoughts. We ought to build their dreams now, and to do so, well I guess to do so in our favour is to make them into a nightmare. I feel ill just saying it to you.”

“How many are we saving?” she asked, timidly. She understood more than most that the actions to come, violent as they were, would save the many through the sacrifices of the few.

“This year alone,” Aldemar said, looking up towards the setting sun, “fourteen thousand, six-hundred and thirty-two in seven avoided battles no

historian will ever write about. Double that in the first season next year, and then four-hundred thousand, roughly, by the first hundred year lapse. More than two million by the second cycle.”

“It feels... worth it,” she whispered.

“It sounds good. Noble, even. I wonder if it’s so.”

Cloud One, once a woman and now deemed a man and a Sil Knight, came to him and made sure their eyes met as she spoke. “Your visions, my Lord Aldemar, few can match them. They are your strength. What made you Lord General. What saved who knows how many in the Lion’s War and the Separatist Wars. They’ll never share your methods, those who live out of what you did. So few are that brave. But that makes it nobler still. It’s an honour that you chose me to come. To see how you make the world better.”

Aldemar smiled. “Little pain,” he said. “That’s our conviction. Bring them death, but quick.”

“Then quicker still we draw the wounds,” she said, knowing the protocol. Violence was needed in a place like this. Violence as a deterrent for a land without wisdom. But the violence need not be felt. Those that would die would be a step beyond sleep before their most gruesome wounds would be made to already inert bodies. It would seem they suffered, a convenient lie to breed horrors and peace.

But she would not do it. He would not let her.

Aldemar waited for her to sleep and used her Fire to keep her there, under his ruana and the broken rock where they had chosen to rest.

The barbaroi saw the figure of the lion first. It was cut from the moonlit horizon in stark black, its mane to the wind and its master by its side. The hammer was unhooked and the will to kill unleashed. Kill to save. Kill to give life. Kill to release tensions and teach. Kill to be good. The old story of the sacrificial lamb. But this time it was true. This time the certainty of the result was inscribed in the holy flow at his veins. It had been written by history and revealed by Fire. Revealed by the will to find an ultimate good.

He marched down the hills of Carestes, west of lake Grisa, to find the Priestess and her hearth. She was accompanied by two Casiks and their guard. Twenty-four men at arms, their long spears in hand. Like him they wore Armoria, the Relic-armour God had made for man’s protection. It pressed against their naked bodies like a second skin. So thin it was few believed it could stop a blade or an arrow, yet both would fail against its Fire-bled fabric. Aldemar’s ruana distorted his human form against the dimness of the moon’s light; with it he was not a man but a spider-like demon, a great beast with a flowing mane, a two-legged lion roaring in their midsts.

His hammer reached one first near the ankles, lifting him, setting his heart

level with the world. The hammer plunged against it, not breaking the Armoria, for that would not happen with regular steel, but pulsing through the skin beneath, shattering the ribcage, turning organs to mush. Alfeir of Harush, who liked the way drops moved the surface of lakes, died before the pain of it had registered. It was his scream what he needed, his agonising instant of sudden recollection.

Be at peace, he thought, you're not my enemy but man's friend, for whom you die!

Then the hammer fell against the gentle features that had loved so dearly and kissed so smoothly of another. Muriel was his name who died second when Aldemar Belshazar, Lord General of the Sil came to fight the Barbaroi of Whitegarden.

Braving this silver beast, this man in a lion's mane, this Sil without a face, the warriors of Priestess Ankara fought. They died one by one; Ahanu, who learned how to plant seeds by spitting them just to make children laugh, Gaadhi, the maimed one with beautiful hair who loved his mother more than anything and thought of her as he passed; Naaji, who found faces in the clouds and the shadows of the mountain; Eedli, who had painted on the walls the name of that girl he liked so much; Uli, the old, who knew how to cook the river fish and keep men fat; Quy, who liked to rub his fingers over surfaces of stone and read their stories; Bageesharawee, who had longed to sit by the fire and sing songs to his grandchildren; and Aderu, the woodworker, who was fond of the colour red and the smell of burnt spice.

Aldemar's hammer went through them all, taking them to the River. And to each one, as the hammer fell and their lives ended, he offered a promise and a prayer, that this was necessary, the good of it written in the histories of man over a billion billion years. Nine were enough before the message had been inscribed in those who watched: the Templar cannot be challenged. Not even during a Zodiac Black.

Two Barbaroi warriors, impressive to their peoples in beauty and strength, dared face him before he walked up the dais to their Priestess. Ador tried to strike at him three times, each one closer than the last. But all his movements were known. They had already been made against millions before and in millions of circumstances. Aldemar need only remember them, calculate their similitude to the instant, and follow the common, almost programmed, reactions of poor Ador, who liked to swim against the river and to sleep in the evening, before the world was cold. Indumathi, who was known for his deep voice and wide smile, died too, kneeling on the steps, the hammer beating at his skull so fast he had only seen the moon and the darkness. He died crying for the Priestess and the people and the chance that was lost to live and live again. Someone's arrow almost reached the mark, but the Black Lion Ecco,

a living shadow that protected the Sil, caught it, mid air and roared after the shaft had broken in its jaws.

Aldemar walked, a god amongst men, and not the bravest soul dared move against him. They watched, powerless, stilled by this one who was as strong as the many. The priestess, knowing it was so, stepped forth and some would say she was thinking of her legacy. There was a child by her side, clutching at her hand and snarling, but the woman did not stir or shiver or speak. She knew it was not something she could fight. Not something she would. Hers was the time to die, but not the child's. Aldemar, who found the little one like a cat behind her mother's skirts, offered peace in one swift motion. The fear of death has binary responses and in opposition; to fight back or to flee. He wished it was never the first. *Choose the second, little girl*, he thought. *Choose the second and live.*

It would not be remembered thus. It would be said that the army fought valiantly and its enemy scorned and scolded back into the Forest. One people had been shown the truth, so as to keep them in peace through fear. The other would be told the lie, so as to keep them inspired and dominant. It was the wound in history that is revealed in repetition.

It was a rite as old as the civilisation that bore it.

A wise and cruel and necessary rite.

Aldemar came back to where Cloud One slept and brushed a hand over the flames of their fireplace. When she woke he simply smiled at her. The dry blood on his face told the story.

"It's done," he told her.

Relieved she hadn't seen it, Cloud One smiled. "You've saved them," she said and for a moment as sweet as the passing breeze it seemed almost true.

Chapter 7 – Saviour

What we protect with a lie is not our inner selves but our external self-image. We are conditioned to make assumptions of who we should be from an early age. We are given a name, a job, and a time in which to interpret a role. Still, we find ourselves only within and in that place accessible only to ourselves. By the sum of its parts and the sum of its souls, the world is a great lie we must all believe in. But, in our heart of hearts, we understand and we accept the full power of knowing our truth. So are men made into masters of their own souls and responsible for their own deeds.

So are men made into gods of their inner worlds.

As written in the Seed of Foundation—

Phase 627, Chapter (789,021); Reflections on the Soul: lies, freedom and the self.

3402 AT

The field was bloody mud, thick and heavy.

Or so the scribes had written. Caelestis sat with the large book over his thighs, reading the royal ledger, its ink still powdered and prickly at his fingertips. It read:

In a cemetery of flesh, entrails and the wires of buried Relics, king Aldemar Belshazar, the crown of his kingdom upon his brow, stood before the Priestess of Ankara, leader of a Loudos Tribe in northern Whitegarden. Our gracious regent-queen, Amara, the Beloved, had been on his thoughts when he decided to parley with her. Our Erelim King stood before that woman he came to describe as “just right for leadership,” a tall and fierce Barbaroi, with green eyes under oily black locks. But he was taller, grander, his shadow cast like a statue’s in clear sunset. Immovable.

Caelestis smiled and then frowned at the words that so adamantly described his father. He read on:

Paragons of his majesty’s army saw the priestess wore her profaned Armoria black over her white complexion. It caressed her muscles with muscular armour, sinuous plates of metal, subsistence wires, and breathing tubes. She also wore the Armoria’s chromed steel mask in the form of a snarling beast’s snout. They said the glass before her eyes vanished as she took it off, so we surmise the Relic was aware and awake. The Old Way was at work. They also say there was a girl by the woman’s side: one the age of our prince Darien and the size of our prince Caelestis. Our lord described her to be, “like a little cat in a corner.”

The priestess spoke then in her accented creole. “What d’ya vant, king of dee slaven?” the woman must have asked, and they say she was holding her staff like a flag. Her people believe there is one such, always at the tip, made of wind, and only visible to the faithful. What do you want, king of the slaves, she had said, now better translated. Our king had to adjust his position to hear better. To understand better. In all his grace and majesty, our Lord had trouble understanding the creole. Why waste time learning these barbarous tongues?

But he knew it, like all kings must, the languages of the meek, gracious be his endeavour to learn. He dismissed Ser Vall (shield bearer) and his guard (the bravest man would have done less) and stepped down his destrier, dropping heavy, like an anvil from a ship. He hung hammer and shield from the saddle's rings with mastery and grace and came forth, his steps heavy under a mild rain. Our lord's thick silver hair fell to his shoulders with the braid of our founder Inu to his left side, close to his Eisen-blue eyes. His majesty was huge in person and spirit, a giant carved from moonstone with a heavy braided beard, poorly groomed (a soldier's want and in recognition of his efforts) and as grey as his mane. His face was clean, as a monarch's should, and impassive with the line of red in one cheek. Drawn, they said, by the Iuvenca at his side and previously marked with the blood of his fallen men.

The battles that brought our gracious Lord here had lasted the better part of the Black Year.

The Priestess parlayed for Castle Angevin, owned by the Anges clan for four-hundred years since its discovery and given them by the royal house of Belshazar, in Eisen-land.

Caelestis sighed, pulling the heavy book away for a paused breath. The reading had a brief, albeit boring, intermission where the place, importance and histories of Castle Angevin were described in full, with the first lineages of the Clan and its relation to the Belshazar's as sworn men and close cousins. It was by the blood of Eisen that Angevin existed and by his family's kindness that it stood. He took a glance of the snow behind the window and the falling leaves from the great ceiba tree that shone golden with the sunlight.

He read on:

When the hour was right as only he could know, our Lord of Belshazar conversed with the Priestess of Ankara for the period of nearly a full star-bend (or three hours in Skymind's new dictatums). The woman was arrogant, as all Barbaroi must be during a Zodiac Black, but our master in spirit and land was fiercer still. She threatened to continue the battling and the dying; little love for her own people was made evident in her wants. His majesty must have thought of his men, as all great kings must, just to carry on with what must have been a nightmarish conversation. The woman, if she may be called thus, wanted the Castle North. But Angevin is a God-made Relic, older than stars and the borrowed heritage of the Anges clan, lesser cousins to the Belshazar. What folly it was to plead for such a treasure. And still, the Priestess was right in one count; Deep-winter was months to come and the Zodiac Black yet to end.

Our lord must have wavered, for one cannot use Relics and thereby cannot fight in godly terms during this dark year. In his heart he must have still mourned for Teresa our Thirty-third and for his wife, so recently lost and so clear a reminder of life's uncertainties. He offered a truce. A most wise decision to

spare the men their sufferings in the chilling winds.

He said: "God waits for the time of beginning. When she touches the World Engine, you'll die under my fires. Desist and you shall be forgotten to the Forest."

But these menial people know little of God and the intricacies of life and death in the galaxy. The priestess refused and some say her words were evil and malformed. Full of bitterness and scorn. In his mercy, his majesty, our Lord Belshazar de Simou, First Erelim of Eisengraise, Lord General of the Knights of Sil, Guardian of the Foundation, Master of Horses, Protector Divino and Praetor of God, called the Black Lion and accompanied by the Ecko Kora, Key of Ventil, offered her and her people food and land.

"A place easier to sow," they say he said with kind words.

But Lady Ankara, the false priestess, refused again. Our master knew she had come from Skygarden, fleeing the Imperium's expansion East. Her tribe travelled for seven years through the Apsu. A weakening and terrible journey. In his kindness, he offered the food and the land again as a merciful gift.

She refused thrice a time.

No master is meant to be this patient.

He offered her and her people an alternative.

They said he said: "then submit. Bow to me and God, Priestess Ankara. Make a promise to the earth you stand upon, the sky you live under, the warmth of your star and the embrace of your loved ones, that you'll honour, praise and adore Sara, the Thirty-fourth. Do it and I'll give you what you desire."

He had to explain to them, for these people are always in need of more explanations, that she was not being given a castle but a place among God's people (a greater gift cannot be given to the lesser). They would be baptised. They would be brought to the lands of sowing and taught the ways of the earth and the unmoving house. They would be civilised and called Templar.

A fourth time, now an insult, she refused.

His majesty, our Lord Belshazar, returned to Angevin without hiding the joy of meeting her again in the field. He said, and I heard it from his blessed lips: "to the River with them. Every soul." Months later, when the warriors of Priestess Ankara reassembled for a final showdown, Aldemar Belshazar de Simou, our Erelim Lord and Majesty, our Guardian and Protector, rode to the point of his army. Skies were dark under the pressing cold of deep winter, snows falling heavy and wet, yet hope grew with every minute. The men saw him and were given courage. With the cavalry at each side, soldiers tired of fighting but honoured to do so at his side, he signalled for attack and the battle began. When night came and the Barbaroi asked to retire, Aldemar ordered his troops to fight further and his soldiers knew why.

Two hours after dawn, and by the grace of God, it would all be over.

It was at Skygarden's twelfth hour, not a moment sooner or later, that a pulse flowed through the cosmos and with a singing beat Relics turned to life on their own. Stars above shimmered with new life, turning from red to yellow and white. God's light and blessing had returned and the Zodiac Black was over.

Blessed be our mother. Blessed be her name. Blessed be the father. Blessed be his light. For a hundred years and Sara's life, the suns will be brighter and the days will be warmer.

They say he was unhorsed and that Aldemar Belshazar, our king, had made his way through a thicket of warriors in search of the priestess he now loathed. He held his hammer in one hand and a halberd in the other and when the Relics awakened and the cannons of Angevin fired into the distance he smiled confident the battle, if not the killing, was over. His was the blessed duty.

Dropping his weapons, Aldemar stood surrounded by enemies, yet calm. Before they approached for a kill he took the Bastion of Belshazar, that most holiest of weapons. The Bastion's spell-whip, arms of the Sil, had been summoned and it was alive with light. The long winding and bright metallic strip burned everything it touched, a flaming whip like a dragon's tongue. As it lay sprawled over the mud they say puddles boiled and soil melted. His majesty challenged the enemy with a tip of his head. Too afraid to engage they halted and ran away in fear, as is their wretched nature. Hours later, Our Lord of Eisengraise, blessed be his name and blood, found priestess Ankara kneeling, defeated, as the dawn of Sara's hundred-year reign broke in the horizon with a glistening dawn.

Account written in the year 3402 Anno Autem Transcendentium.

Caelestis closed the book and the pride in him was enough for a wide and honest smile. He would not show it to his father but was as delighted as any boy can be and happy to have him here. Finally home.

*

The battle of Angevin-Ankara of 3401 AT was a memory in the northern mist. Tanks had roared proudly down the hills and to the valley of Eisengraise Castle. An exhausted infantry had retired to the fields of barley and wheat, the banner-men to their manors and keeps, and the knights to the roads. Dukes, marquesses, earls, counts, and barons followed his father down the Seed-road, their capes and flags flying arrogantly to the winds with an expectation of Eisen-courtesies and banquet. It was a sky riddled with ships, windships, and aeroplanes, Relics too costly to power alone. Now, with Black Year's end and the light of God flowing, they were everywhere.

Caelestis felt such joy in seeing the host, tears of his mother's loss turned warm with the thought of his father coming back to live with them. But it was

not for him or his siblings that the Lord General and king of Eisengraise had returned. Interstellar chariot, Vimana, a ship large as a palace, tall as a hill, and that had traversed the Apsu, from one spiral arm of the galaxy to the other, had landed on the castle's marble platform.

God had arrived.

She had come to lay her hands over the grounds of Whitegarden, this planet far from Sky, to offer solace to a people devoid of their ruler. It was tradition after a monarch's death and, with victory over the Barbaroi at hand, the people rejoiced. *But she was not a God*, Caelestis thought looking at her, *just a baby*. Her black hair and dark eyes were estranged to the world as her little hands and fingers tried to grab the eerie flakes of snow that fell over her cradle during the ceremony. Caelestis refused the honour to pray over Sara in her cradle, lowering his face after a careful look inside and shaking it with refusal. He stood in proud defiance of a crowd's desperate want, yet could not care. Their offended whispers and the Speaker's scowls did not deter him. When this god, this baby, returned to Skygarden, his father would go with her. For that he refused her and even hated her.

Darien unknowingly escaped the rite by hiding his face over a book and letting the world pass him by. But Caelestis knew of it and wilfully frowned with anger and tightened his lips. For him, who had lost his mother, the world was cold, like a tear that has fallen for too long. So, when his father gave them all a single kiss goodbye and marched on behind God's entourage of strangely dressed maidens and ruana-bearing knights, Caelestis made hands to fists and ran away. He refused his embrace, hating him for preferring God. With the chapel to the brink, the regent and her maidens kneeling, and unwilling to see his father leave, young Caelestis wrote his brother a farewell letter, kissed his sister goodbye, and stowed into the dark corners of Vimana.

If father won't stay, he thought, *neither will I*.

And so the engines roared the interstellar ship to flight, with him in it.

It was a strange feeling, flying, falling against the dark of space, without the wind at your face. The windows took it all, the great hull unbreakable against the planet's atmosphere.

"There's no wind in space," they had told him when first he learned of the Apsu. Looking out, as the ship breached the atmosphere of his home planet and staring into the vast emptiness of space he nodded, determined to see this through. A quiet reverie came to his mind. "It doesn't matter how much the stars try," his mother had told him while standing under the coloured blanket of the night sky, "the galaxy will always be dark. Yet, wherever you stand, Cae, light will reach you and, reflected on you, you too will become like a star."

He came to an unused and dusty room, thick glass the only barrier between him and outer space. Enthralled by the dark endlessness where life came from

and yet where no one could live the boy of seven held a dream in his heart, that he would follow his father and bring him back where he belonged. It was more than desire, it was almost a need, like he had to be here, every gram of him, every thought, gravitating to this willful choice of being in this ship with God and father and the memory of what once had been a family.

He turned his back to the deep, pulling a cloak over his shoulders, the stars at his back, and closed his eyes. He fell asleep deep in the midst of that region of the mind where dreams feel warm and true. Time passed him by but he could sense only a moment, stretched. Dreaming and being aware of dreaming, his conscience remained, somehow, in the now. It was overcome by it, by the cold of this room and the scent of water in the air, like metal. It was, also, in the feeling of a future he could almost touch. A terrifying, sublimely unavoidable future where the will was slave and desire was borrowed.

*

"This isn't god," a voice, like a prayer consumed with anger, whispered in his mind. *"God can't be innocent when she's to blame for the world."*

Caelestis woke with sweat all over and, even with eyes wide open, he could hear a man's whisper coming through the door and the wall, the air and the drowsy shrouds of slumber. It had not been a dream, closer to a memory but impossibly so since it whispered of what was yet to be.

He stood up with a lingering echo that begged him to move, to run.

But he doubted.

"This isn't god," he heard the voice again, words as clear as if he was speaking them himself. *"Not a god. Only your god and it must die."*

Caelestis widened his gaze turning to the closed door of the little room, heart beating. Down the corridor he heard screams of horror and pain, of sword against sword, of electrical bursts dashing through thin air and thunder. Men cried, wailing in agony, his father's voice in the choir, and then only silence.

He ran, feeling his throat narrow and dry, legs cramped from the rush. Beyond the dormant gardens and the great corridor, a grand doorway, like a temple's, lay broken. Not a soul was there to see or help, everyone around simply gone. Looking again he found bodies of men; one here, another several metres apart. They were damaged; dead beyond repair or consolation. He found a valiant knight in armour near the great windows. His father's captain, a Sil. He had thought this man invincible once. Shivering and coming to that greatest of doors, bronze-coloured and heavy like a sea-borne wave, he heard a muted noise. It was not his heart and breath but it beat like them, the final strokes of a battle going on inside. He didn't know why or even how, but he made his way under the beaming light of that room.

The space inside was filled with burning light and radiating heat. Whatever had transpired, a battle of titans, was over. He found, lying on the floor, the bod-

ies of Sara's Guardian Knights; Sil moaning over puddles of red. Some quivered in agony, blood sprouting from opened wounds. Others lay still as stones. These were Solaria's enthroned masters, its most powerful warriors, trained in the most deadly of arts. They were the Erelim of Erelim, capable of tapping into the future and fighting with foreknowledge. They bore the power of the stars and of time itself and their Fire was the light of every morning in every landscape of this ageing galaxy, and they were dead or dying at his feet. There was a grave heat, a burning warmth that grew from their blood and out, flowing out with a wrath that churned at his skin.

Beyond them, a man in crimson robes, victorious and wrathful, walked towards God's silver cradle like a creature consumed by hunger and cold. He was wounded, shivering and angry, his hand over a dagger, its tainted blade coming closer to God. Caelestis felt the heat and smell of men in death's trial and tasted the humid tang of blood in the air but it didn't scare him. Dead Sil lay before him, his father amongst them, and, for a moment as long as the gasp of a drowning man, he could not look away. Aldemar had a wound that had opened his chest like ripe fruit. It was all he could look at, like it called to him.

Vimana swayed and the majestic view of deep space, endless black, circled towards a planet sprawled beyond the glass, gold and emerald; a jewel in the skies. As such beauty entered the room with coloured light he woke to his father's voice.

"Stop... him..." the man pleaded, hands trembling, voice breaking, one hand trying for the man in red robes and the dagger in his hand.

Pulled out of his trance, Caelestis took a wooden bow, heavy and thick with blood, and an arrow. He tried to set the shaft to the line but, as he pulled, the arrow fell out of place and the line all but shook under his frail hands. He locked eyes on the assassin's hand, terrified as if the dagger was meant for him. The man's arms were burned to bone and sinew, scarred by recent flames. The sight made him shiver with fear.

He lifted the bow once more and once more the arrow fell from the line.

The man was over the cradle, muscles tightened, dagger shivering with anger as his lips moved. He was whispering. The assassin was talking to God.

Caelestis tried to nock the arrow again, this time frustration crawling up his legs with cramps and jolts. Still, he could not set the arrow to the line. A quiver in his fingers made him weak and he fell to his knees, beaten. He didn't have the strength the bow demanded to be drawn.

"Stop... him..." Aldemar begged once more, eyes closing with disappointment. "You can... I've seen... it... *She* died... for it. *She*... for... you. For... *her*."

She? Her?

When tension seemed gone from the assassin's face, when his eyes set on

the baby with a sense of peaceful tranquillity, the dagger above her like a fang and ready to fall, Caelestis lifted the bow, his mind empty of thought. He pulled on the line and released.

The arrow flew and struck the man on the left flank, breaking ribs and piercing tissue and heart. Caelestis felt the tingling in his scraped fingers resonate with the sound of the knife as it bounced on the steel floor near God's cradle. With the beat of arrow on flesh, the man's hood moved away and their eyes met for a moment long enough to burn in him the grief of one enslaved to agony. Caelestis closed his eyes when the assassin's body burst to light with a flash. The man had vanished in thin air, like a firefly in the dark.

He dropped the bow as men rushed in, arrows nocked, swords unsheathed, their Eckos ready to pounce, but he didn't care anymore about the man or the knife or God. He knelt by his father's side, afraid to touch him, and saw the man smiling and nodding and smiling again as he closed his eyes as if for the last time.

A Iuvenca healer came but shook her head with sullen denial. "Let him go," the woman said. She was grey of hair and white of robes, already tainted with his father's blood. "He's gone to the River. To your mother."

The Iuvenca knelt by the kid's side, ready to offer his comfort, but Caelestis would not have it. He took her long skirt, pulling, and pressed his hands over the huge chest of his injured father. The cloth turned red as the boy watched the breathing subside.

"He's going," the woman promised. "Maybe a farewell? You won't regret a final word."

"No!" Caelestis screamed. "No, you can't!" Blood gushed out as he lifted the skirt to see the size of the wound. It was deep red and wet. "You can't die, not you!" He took his shirt off but this time he didn't just set it over the wound. Instead, he pushed down the opened flesh until the cloth was warm and wet to his fingers.

Clean it with pain, Aldemar had told him once when he scraped his knees. Pain is the measure of life. Make it hurt, son, so you know it's working.

And so the boy pushed the cloth trying to hurt his father as much as a seven year old could, tears running away with the terror of definite loss. "You can't, not you!" he yelled as the men toiled around in a maelstrom of screams and anguish and anger. "Not you," he whispered as he laid his head over the man's chest, crying. "Not you."

There were knights rushing in, kings and warriors, Speakers and Readers, lords and maidens wailing with horror, praying and smiling. They surrounded the cradle where, untouched, God cried. As the winds cooled and the people silenced, Caelestis could feel nothing but the warmth of his father cooling away. In future years, when things were calm and he could recall the moment with

deeper clarity, he would come to believe even Sara had felt his grief for, at that moment, she stopped crying and the room turned peaceful and still. The world, he thought, watched his father go and sighed.

“Look!”

Caelestis felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. He sat up staring at his father’s chest. It was moving. He was breathing in and out, resting, sleeping and alive.

“You must’ve closed the wound,” the Iuvenca assured. “Well done, Cae, you saved your father.”

“He saved more than our Lord General,” another said with a quiver in his voice, “he saved God.” The man was lifting the bloodied arrow in hand.

When Caelestis turned to the cradle a dozen or more knelt, looking at him, smiling; some crying others praying with eyes closed and locked in depths of gratitude.

“The Erelim,” they said bowing with unmeasured gratitude. “The Erelim of Belshazar! God’s saviour! Our Moshayim!”

Chapter 8 – Guardian’s Saviour

The space between us widened with every passing year and even as he died, holding him in my arms and crying, I knew it was for the best. I knew it had to be done. I knew it would one day be me and I would follow on his gracious example.

*As written in the Seed of Foundation—
Phase 8,334, Chapter (720,832); Losing the Battle*

3402 AT

It was known that for each bloodline, noble or not, only one could be Ere-
lim and for each family the chosen was its master. He would bear the glory, the
spirit and the blessing of God. He would rule over his family, he would counsel
and understand them, he would guide them. In the noble caste, of which very
few could boast, the Ere-
lim were lords and kings. And some of them were em-
perors. Even more, the few valiant enough, were Sil. And if he chose this path,
to be a conduit of God’s power, he alone would learn of the Sil Fate Arts. He
would calm the Erelia or vanquish them. He would show Relics how to find
balance and master the Unborn, teaching them who is kin and who is foe. He
would make the walls of the God-made, once rotting with abandon, heal, and
grow. He would bring forth God’s light. The boy had heard as much but never
thought it would have something to do with him.

“The Foundation is God’s home,” his father told him soon after the incident
as he took the boy’s glasses and stored them in a drawer as if he no longer need-
ed them. The man wore bandages over his injured chest and scarred left arm but
that didn’t stop him from instructing his son, now that he was to become master
of Eisengraise and prince of a galactic domain. “Do you remember what *he* said
when paradise was taken from us? What’s written?”

“That she’d give it back when we stop dreaming,” Caelestis said, eyes on
that little pup Amara had given him. He wondered if a dog could dream.

“Yes. When men stop desiring, what the Speakers call dreaming, only then
will God give us back our home.”

“But we are home!” he said, holding a smile. “I brought you hom—”

“A Sil,” his father interrupted, immersed in his own thoughts, “secures this
truth. He trains with more than swords, you’ll know, sending the mind in me-
metic voyages, endless and full with anguish.”

“Voyages? Where?”

“The deep past.” His father said it ominously, still weary from the injury
at his chest. “This, not the sword or the body, but this is what makes them so
powerful. The most,” he coughed into a handkerchief, a wet, worrying bark,
bloody and unending. He took a painfully long breath. “Yes, we... we are the
most powerful.”

“More than a king?”

Seeing the boy’s joy, Aldemar’s face turned as if bitten by a silent snake. “Son,” he spoke with a grim tone, “the Erelim submit to horrible pains in order to forget about their dreams and to serve God, as intended.”

“I’ll be a good Erelim, father.”

“You’ll be more than that,” Aldemar replied. “Our line is thick with the duty of Sil. You’re the Erelim of Belshazar and there’s a path you must follow. It’s... unavoidable.”

The man took the little pup in one hand, lifting it from the scruff and setting it beneath the light of the hanging chandelier above. “This little creature, he’s no choice but to be a beast. He has no past, you see. But we do. To delve into the history of man is no easy feat. There’s too much of it and most of it you won’t even understand. It will terrify you and break you, if you’re weak. Leave you a nihilist shell, waiting to die.”

Caelestis reached up with hurt until the man placed the dog back in his arms.

“You’ve no choice but to be more than a man,” Aldemar said, kneeling by his side. “And too soon, I say.”

Caelestis patted the pup’s scruff hoping it wasn’t hurt.

“Look at me,” Aldemar said. His father’s eyes were cold, like ice over the seabed. “There’s never been an Erelim as young, so there’s no other way to set this to you but plainly and hope you understand. You’ll have to live far from your brother and sister and you won’t see your aunt again for many years.”

Caelestis shook his head. “But I didn’t do—”

The man stood over him. “There was a time when an Erelim’s journey started and ended in the Foundation. When Erelim were Sil and Sil were Erelim. Now... now they honour Adolf with marriage and bear children, like ordinary men. Now they are kings.” He almost sounded disgusted. “Stand proud son, even then we Belshazar kept to the Sein Kalei.”

“As God intended,” Caelestis recited, knowing the words of the singular path.

“As God intended,” the man’s voice came deep from his wounded throat. “To wed no one and bear no children.” A bitter shadow moved under his eyes. “To love nothing. To live one step beyond man and die like stars, in service, loyalty and devotion. To be, in every breath, Children of Ends.”

Caelestis stood confused. “But you married mother.”

Aldemar coughed again, turning away and spitting into the handkerchief. “It was Adolf’s law then. I had no choice. But—”

“You didn’t want it?” Caelestis asked, sensing his father’s sad undertones. He placed the dog at his feet, escaping the man’s gaze. Aldemar grabbed him by the shoulder, unable to answer, and walked to the window under the archway.

"I want to," Caelestis said, "and when I have a family I'll never leave."

"I made that mistake, son. Drunk with what I thought was freedom. Listen well, a family—"

"You mean mom?"

Like the halls of the castle, Aldemar's office was riddled with Relic trinkets, each as valuable as a commoner's house, and dozens of intricate tapestries hanging above or resting at his feet. The man's eyes were now on one of them and the unthreaded edges, torn by time. Both father and son felt like them, the torn unwound edges of a thing meant for beauty and stepped over by time. It was long before they spoke again.

"You're too young to understand," his father said solemnly. "The Sil should ever be at God's side. A wife... children? It complicates the duty. Sil have no time for—"

"I know" he pulled on Titan's chain like one draws breath and looked up at the man with angered eyes.

Aldemar lifted his chin. "It's tradition that our family serves God. Look Cae, a Sil is—"

"I don't want to!" he exclaimed. "I don't want to be Sil! You left us for that, and now mommy left us. So I don't—"

"Cae—"

"No! I won't. I'll never be—"

"You *will* be Sil!" the man roared, red faced and finally angered.

"I won't!"

"You will, stupid boy, even if I have to force you myself!" An electric burst came down his body, a clap of minute thunder as a spark jumped from his joined hands. He had made the Act of Terminus, electricity now flowing up and down his limbs, hair pushed up like he was mad and deranged. "You will, Caelestis Adolf! You hear? As was I and as all Erelim should! D'you think your mother questioned my decision? D'you think she reproached me like you do now?"

Aldemar extended a hand to him, sparks leaping unto the nearby desk and chair. A wind blew the candles to their most dim, and only the man seemed to glow.

"You will be Sil," And his voice was a confusing tune, a mother's lullaby and a father's reproach, primal, reaching him, to his core, to the brain under the brain. A part of him had heard this tone before a million billion times before. It made him wish for compliance, like all would be well if he just followed that parental advice, a blanket for his thoughts. He was about to acquiesce, unknowingly as to why, when the man released, hand made to an embittered fist, and the Fire between them waning away.

"I won't force you," Aldemar said, suddenly submerged in deep misery. "I won't... for her. I trust that you'll make the right decision." Free from the

Sil's commanding Fire-imbued words, the boy looked down and at his dog. His lips squirmed with unspoken thoughts and his hands turned cold and sweaty. Aldemar waved a hand and from the corner came Reader Keiser Tohm holding a long quill, an inkpot and a wooden pad. Candlelight made it hard to see and the man strained his eyes, narrowing them like a sleeping cat.

"Take my son's promise in writing," Aldemar ordered. "Speak, Caelestis."

The paper spread over a wooden slate, dark ink shining at the feather's tip. "What will it be, little master?" the Reader asked in a sweet tone.

The boy held his father's gaze. "I want..." the choice was clear in his heart, yet there was tension there as well. No decision could be made under such pressure and still a part of him vied against his instincts. "I want to be a Sil," he said at last, not by force, but desiring to please his father above all. "I want to be like you." He felt a man just by saying it, but his gaze dropped and a sadness came over him.

The scribe wrote it down and Aldemar placed his seal over the wax.

*

"You'll be proud on your deathbed, son," his father told him the next morning. They stood near Amara's grave, the wind on their capes and the drizzle on their hair. "Perhaps that's the only moment in which to be rightfully proud. In which to be... anything at all."

"My death?" the seven year old asked.

"Your legacy is defined in that instance."

"I'm just a boy. I'm scared, father."

"Don't be. There was a time, very long ago, when men lived confined. They couldn't travel the Apsu but stayed on one planet. All of humanity in one place. Imagine that. We call them Earthwalkers."

"Yes," the boy said, nodding and looking at the gathering mists on the savannah. "The quiet people."

"Not very quiet if they were the first to leave their home. It takes courage, son. A whole lot of it. You'll need such courage now that you'll follow on that legacy of breaking the barrier and going beyond the bounds."

"What inspired them to leave? What broke their fear?"

"The Skyfarers had many heroes to inspire them. One such was the fire-blade maker. He used this weapon first." Aldemar lifted his Bastion, that silver hilt without a blade yet eager to draw it in light. "You'll soon have it. The light in it, Cae, the light, it's so hot, so dangerous and disobedient only the fiercest may tame it. A wonder to behold."

"Did he make it?" Caelestis asked. "This man? Was he a Sil?"

"Probably a Sil, yes. But he didn't make it. Very little we do. But God? God's made everything and so you must rejoice to live in her time. It was her idea, a beautiful thing it is, her mind. It was born in her like the dream that her

blessed children would someday break the boundaries of their planetary eggs and travel across space. As it was made in her mind it was brought to us, a Relic born of God's mind and the world's matter as it condenses. This weapon was first in a series of gifts she's given us. It's merely a part in a story."

"Our story?" the boy said, lured to enchantment by the tale. "When did this happen?"

"Too long ago. The Seed says trillions, we say the time of beginning. All life is echo to the past. All thought is bound to it. This," he stared at the distant village under the first rays of morning light, "is the inheritance of your species. The memetic gift of God. This and everything in the world."

"Mem... mem, metic?"

"Memetic, yes. You'll soon understand. You're to be disciple to a grand master, worthy of your deed. He's a Cloud No-mother."

"A No-mother? Not you?"

Aldemar shook his head with feigned remorse. "You'll be Silen to Erelim Sil Cid de Merak. He's a veteran of the wars and he was there when you let your arrow fly. He finds promise in you and will train you well in all the Prayers of Fire and the Fate Arts of the Sil. He'll make you as strong as intended."

"Mommy said it's better to be kind than strong."

"Yes," Aldemar whispered, sullen darkness over his eyes, "but your mother's dead."

It was as much as if he had screamed it. Tears rushed to Caelestis' eyes, dropping heavily over his cheeks. He tried to find them, falling, but they mixed with the subtle rain.

Aldemar shook his head, frustration clouding his stern countenance. "You'll become strong Cae, won't you? For her?"

Caelestis dropped his gaze once more but lifted it again, near whimpering and feigning pride. "And you," he said, valiantly. "And I'll do it for you too, dad."

Clouds spilt down the eastern mountain range into the silent valley, preparing the grass and forest for the morning dews. There was tranquillity in this landscape he would soon abandon, a simplicity that seemed to fade before his eyes.

"Can I take Titan with me?" he asked.

"It's best that you don't."

"Please," Caelestis picked the dog up out of reflex and embraced the creature as if it was the last time. "I beg!"

There was no use to begging but Aldemar's eyes flashed with something white and pure and a gentle clap of electric flow distilled down his cane as he took it. The man was lost in thought, lost in a deep reverie that his eyes, whitened as if he had suddenly turned blind, witnessed alone. The proximal

future was blurry and unreadable but the recollection of a memetic memory was somewhere near for him to touch. He strained and found it, clearly. Aldemar looked sadly at his son, eyes blue once more, finding a tender smile to offer in a plausible future he had almost dreamed of. "What will your brother say?"

"He'll let me," Caelestis promised. "He told me."

"Of course," Aldemar sighed, knowing it was a lie. "Take Titan with you. Friends should stay together. You'll also wear the Sil Armoria from now on, but without a crest, do you hear?"

"Why not?" Caelestis asked. "Why not the crest, daddy?"

"I'm not your daddy!" the man replied with reproach. "I'm your father."

The boy's gaze fell and his lips hardened.

The man forced a smile. "Because we mourn, son. It wouldn't be right." He made a gesture, his alone; closing and opening of his eyes, as if to show patience. As if to show love.

Caelestis thought hard on what to say next. "Will we travel far?"

"Quite far. Beyond the stars of our sky and to another star."

"Why is our land so far from God?"

"Someone must protect the wayward planets. They have so little in them. Our presence alone pushes the Summanus back. When you're old enough you'll see. You'll return and watch over the lands for a final rest, like your grandfather did."

"Will I spend my life at her service? Will I die alone?"

"Death comes to us in ones," Aldemar said, frowning. "We all die alone."

"Mother died alone," Caelestis whispered, not wanting to be heard but unable to stay quiet. "You were not with—"

Aldemar stopped and gave him a stare. "Count yourself lucky if your final act is that of giving life." The man started off. "Kora? Where are you?"

The lion Ecko, black of fur and with glowing eyes, had waited behind the rose garden, ready to escort the boy. It approached, bowing to him and its master. Caelestis petted the living Relic and found in its blue eyes a softer gaze than his father's. "Hello Kora," he said. "Will you come with us?"

"With you," said the beast, in its echoing, metallic voice.

"Where are we going?"

The lion turned down the gravel road towards the village. "They're already waiting."

Without a word Aldemar carried off towards the castle and Caelestis found the sight of him, casting a shadow at that huge lion that seemed small by his side, the most magnificent picture of strength and bravery. "I leave you for now, son," Aldemar said.

"Are you not coming?"

"I must rest and you," the man gave him a long look, "you must see to your

future.”

When he was gone beyond the grand doors Caelestis knelt by Titan’s side, petting him with care. “I shouldn’t have said anything,” Caelestis lamented. “I angered him, now he doesn’t want to be with me.”

“You mourn, little master,” the lion said. “He mourns too. Loneliness is a man’s way of coping.”

“What’s mourn?”

“The socially accepted form of sadness,” Kora dictated from within its records. “Because it is a public expression of grief, your group, or the collective unconscious, participates in your sadness. By respecting your silence and your space they are included and so you heal. Thereby, the group helps you cope. Helps you carry on.”

Caelestis sighed as he turned to look at the road and the village ahead. He cared not for the word or its definition, only the solace of finding meaning, at least in that.

“Is this what happened when the Ormus children were lost? Van and Mariana?”

“It brought great sadness to the people, yes. But they did not mourn. They were not given that chance.”

Walking down the main road he heard doors and windows open to the waking sun. His father had been adamant they come before first light but Caelestis had not realised why until then. At dawn the people of Eisengraise performed the Baptism of the Sun. An entire kingdom woke, stepped out into the light and turned to their star. They showed their tools of labour, gave the day a name, any name they wanted to remember, and prayed to Sara. When the sun showed, Caelestis presented his white sword for the first time since his mother died, closed his eyes in prayer, and was about to offer the star its name—for whom he would live this day—when he heard a scuffle. There were queer noises and a ruckus all too uncommon for the silent people of Eisen.

When he opened his eyes they were looking at him.

“Saviour,” they whispered.

“Our lord saved her,” they said, owing to his deeds as if they were their own.

“Our Erelim of Eisengraise!”

“Our king!”

“The Moshayim.”

“The Moshayim,” they said again. “The Moshayim!”

“Your grace,” a woman came, bringing a bushel of apples and placing it at his feet. “May you live a hundred years.”

Another offered blue petal flowers, others chickens and a hog and they all said, “may you live a hundred years.” Men beamed, their huge beards gapping

to reveal the yellow of untamed teeth. Children looked from the distance with eyes as wide as plates and girls smiled at him as they never had.

Kora's senses were alert; the lion's black-silver frame prepared to defend the boy. But there was no danger. Titan barked once. A deep voice inside the small pup. It made the people laugh.

"May you live a hundred years," they said again.

Caelestis took the apples, the bread and a purple flower. "I thank you," he said, though he did not know whom to look at and how to smile when all he had done was fail to kill one who bares fangs at God.

Chapter 9 – Messiah

The state of things, as determined by human nature, is that one follows another if he believes. Belief, thus, is the magnitude of personal and social progression. This creates the illusion that a truly theocratic state can be assembled. But even under the pressure and presence of a God, humans can but distinguish their own needs as urgent. So it is that, run by men, the theocratic state will always corrupt itself and breed liars.

*As written in the Seed of Foundation—
Phase 11,450, Chapter (12,001,016); A critique to the Theocratic State*

3402 AT

When he was ten Van walked into the forest that surrounded their lonely cabin in the mountain and returned to find his sister, Mariana, gone and a banquet of meat unlike he had ever seen.

Mother told him: “Come and eat, Van, my Erelim boy.”

And he ate and his mother watched him and pressed him saying “eat more”. And the sunset and morning came and Mariana was no more.

Ever since, mother started to smile and the warm feeling of a borrowed life became his eye of memory, ever wide in deep reminiscence. In visions, he saw a grand court, a loving father, a life of plenty and power. Kings were his servants, kneeling at the sight of him and the world looked small from the hanging terraces of a palace as large as wonders.

When he spoke of these dreams Mother said: “the world is yours, Van. You are the future.”

But he was no more than a peasant’s boy living in the mountains and herding sheep for the eastern lord. It was all he could do to support his mother who refused to work and spoke with shadows, requesting servants that were not there to bathe her and feed her and put her to bed. Once a month a rider in black would come bearing a sack full with hams and berries, beer and wheat and many things he found tasteful. But every month mother took it to the river and threw it all away.

Like many others they had escaped the capital during the destruction of the Realm, when Brant Belmont overthrew the Archon of God, ending the theocratic line and creating a military state still called the Imperium. Mother hid them in a cart full with wine barrels and dry bread and crossed the border never to return. For years they lived in those places, deep in the mountains, where tribes and clansmen had been recently civilised and from their charity. It was said that no man was as devout as the recently converted. They found the truth of it in the midst of former tribes that resented the Imperium’s new military rule. They, like mother and the millions who remembered, prayed often for a return of the Archon and God’s Foundation to power. Alas, that would not be, for the heirs of

Ormus, last of the theocratic line, had been murdered.

When they first came to the cabin Van was five and full of wonder. He thought it the perfect place for a good life and took his sister by the hand to every newfound creek of their mountain, showing her the colours in mushrooms, flowers, critters, birds and sunsets. But winter of 3394 AT came and was cruel. As the snows covered the house in icy blankets, Van sickened and mother became angry and embittered. She sang, night and day, and prayed for his recovery until one day she told him to go for a long walk to the river. He told her the chill in his muscles ached, hunger pressed and that his bones were skin deep, but she insisted.

Before he left, Mariana told him she had a gift for him.

Mother said: “look at her, Van, with that sweet smile, playing with the tadpoles in the stream. There’s no Fire in her, for the good are never strong.”

And Van had listened as he smiled at Mariana holding a tadpole in her palms and saying: “for you brother.”

She was a sweet girl, as white of skin and hair as him and with a tender smile. She had always been the true love of his life so when, in a dream, he found himself starving to death and with fingers tied across her neck, he wondered if God would ever forgive him.

Seven years after Mariana’s disappearance Mother said: “do you remember Van? Can you remember now what happened?”

He was thinking of Mariana but mother, annoyed, pushed him to think of a palace and a court, a Throne and a God. And yes. He remembered. He had felt cold that day, even as the summer heat blazed through the windows of the Dogma and his father burned to death before him. He had not looked away, not when the Archon was pushed off his Throne, nor when he was hanged, set aflame with the magic of Brant Belmont, and then shot in the brain with the arrow of the Horse Lord, Aldemar Belshazar. He was four then and had held his baby sister in his arms, like a rope at sea.

Mother said: “You’re no peasant’s boy, but the last son of Seilock. Your name is Vangelis Aldrich Ormus and God sees you first. You’ll be her true saviour!”

Already knowing this in his heart of hearts, for the memories had come once and again in waves of bitter chills, Van said: “where’s Mariana?” His mind was in that feast of meat he had been given the day his little sister disappeared.

And Mother answered: “there can only be one Erelim of Ormus. Only one may inherit the Realm. Only one is truly beloved by God. I made sure.”

As Mother died, a sour grin in her lips, he thought of those that had passed before him and that memory that haunted his nights. He would never understand why they hadn’t strangled him to death right in the moment of his birth. He could think of nothing else as he placed the last stone over the empty grave

of his little sister, seven years late. He was no longer hungry, that was certain, and a part of him would never again feel hunger.

That part would one day kill him.

He was seventeen, not yet a man, and already he knew the worst of his sins. With dry eyes and a jaded smile, he thanked Mariana one last time and walked away. He was bones daubed with milk-white skin, hair like a winter curtain over angry eyes, crystal red and thin, and he wore the greasy rags of the mother he had just strangled to death.

With a full stomach, Van walked like a beggar through abandoned Seed-roads in a winter so cruel his feet had gone numb and his toes black. He lost an ear to frostbite, and shaved the side of his head, so his hair would not brush painfully against the wound. The heir of Seilock, once the highest of men, was now torn and beaten by the elements; he was cold, weak and frail with only fear to push him through the nights. Waking suns witnessed Van pray to the bloody stars for God's voice and for forgiveness. But there was no hope in him like there was no mercy in the roads of Skygarden. The northern lands of this planet were stark and untamed and there was no anger in him to make them sweet but a soft depression consuming his will. The road was flanked on both sides by oppressive trees, their dark branches like fingers, narrowing into the distance. Faces of Relics too large to unearth and too broken to be used, lay scattered about, their entrails petrified into the faces of mountains. Some beamed with residual light, but Van could never find them or their warmth. Here was a permanent wind, roaring clouds that spilt over the valley and down steep hills, forcing him to hunch until his back ached.

Only in the Forest could he find refuge, with its singing breath, drawing him in as a chasm calls for the brave. At times he wanted to be lost in that unknown. If God would not forgive him, then best it would be that she could not find him.

In his youth, back in Araboth, he had heard of the storm, Summanus, and longed to see it, that place where one cannot breathe and cannot live. It was, they said, the part of all planets without God. To find it he would have to traverse the Forest and move beyond, to that place where nothing lived and the eyes of God slept. There, he hoped, he would find peace.

And the people of the Forest, who see with eyes of future-tense, found him staring at the dark and said: *she will come from that lowest of parts where one's corruption seems irredeemable.*

Mother had refused to take the children into the Forest but in the direst of circumstance, and never near Summanus. She knew well those ruins of ancient cities, devoured by primordial life, would sooner become their grave than their fortress. So he kept back, respectful of that sea of uncharted green. Mother had warned of the horror saying: "you must never go there, the place without God.

Summanus is enemy of life.”

After Mariana there was no force to keep him sane and he entered the Forest willingly, seeking to survive it and see this place of nothing. As he stared at the Forest and heard it whispering his name he thought of a journey through that place where only Animal Spirits and atheists lived. Narrows between trees were adorned by white hanging beards over tangled branches. Invisible birds sang and light beams breached tree crowns like spears. Animals he had only seen in Araboth’s gardens stared at him from bushy grottos or stone caverns. Noises were blurred into an eerie silence where only rocking trees snored.

Van hesitated, thinking of returning to the Seed-road, but fear had been his only partner for too long. With heavy steps he walked beyond a large sequoia, holding to lianas and drooping roots and into a place where a brook sprang as if from the earth. He followed the stream to its source, a small pool under a tree. Kneeling, he leaned close to take water. When the liquid was in his hands the feeling of desire was taken by a sudden dread. A warm breath of air fell on him, the heavy tang of rotting flesh making him tighten his lips. This saved him for, a single sound, and the creature that looked down on him would have snatched half his body in a bite.

It was an Erelia, a Forest Spirit, a wolf; a creature like any other but large as a freeman’s house. Its paws were thick and heavy and had made shallow pools of water where it walked. There was a trail of these pools that led to the creature’s pack, a pack of ordinary wolves staring, enthralled by Van’s whiteness.

Van stood, hands joined, carrying the water in them, and looked at the bright yellow gaze of the Animal-spirit. Closing his eyes he whispered: “eat me.”

The movement of the creature was thus intoned to the noises of the Forest he barely noticed when it had moved away, the pack following behind. The Erelia had forgiven him.

Standing under the trees, the green and the black, Van inhaled and gave a silent whimper as he lifted his hands to the sky. The water in his palms rained on him and the people of the Forest said: *she will be given a name in silence through forgiveness and the world will know that she lives.*

His journey through the Forest and towards Summanus continued.

Cloaked by trees and things that live was an ancient Dormin Relic, a lonely temple abandoned and lost between two hills. Like Araboth and all God-made structures across Solaria this one had walls like the bark of the Tree of God. Beautiful tumours distorted moulded drawings, images, and stories only the Seed could tell and that had formed in the black metal over centuries. Van looked at one of these tales; a snake climbing out of a hole and into the hands of God. Tempted, he abandoned his quest for the hellish tempest, Summanus, and entered the temple. He walked across wide corridors in the likeness of Araboth

but dressed by moss and stony growths. Within dark passages a sparking noise and a beaming light called.

The Relic-temple was warm with God's light and Van felt it on his bare feet as he moved across one dusty hall after another. Walls wept with drops of water tapping on the floors and a soft mist played with the movements of his legs. Missing toes and the purple wounds of ice on flesh mixed with the dark metal, warm and marbled under his feet. He walked forth, careless and unhindered by painless loss. When he reached the source of light he found a wounded Ecko, a Relic made to resemble a snake. Half its chest was opened by a terrible injury and steely flesh dripped down like melted wax; black ink of the Relic's decomposing body. Drops burned and flashed as they touched ground; sparks alerting the poor beast to hiss at one corner then another.

The millennial Relic had lost its master, the man's bones, dagger, and Armoria, still resting under its coiled body. The white snake lived without living, disconnected from God's light and thus unruly. Its master's bones held some measure of Fire and so the Ecko remained awake in this state of partly-conscious existence. An Unborn, they called such Relics. Unborn for they lived without a notion of God and therefore suffered in this half-formed life.

Van stared at the Relic-creature and then at the Armoria beneath it. It was a beauty, armoured limbs white like pearls and sinuous like a river. He reached out with pale fingers over black, trying to take it but the Ecko hissed, blind but dangerous. Scared, he pulled his hand to safety. Sweat, exhaustion, and fever felt cold on his neck and armpits. Noble-blooded could tame these Unborn Relics, but not him. Not after losing his transcendence and being forgotten by God.

Failing the challenge he left the Unborn to its horrible existence and was about to leave the temple when thunder shook the skies. Admiring the spectral vestiges of nocturnal lightning Van saw God in the sky and said: "I'm here. I am what I am. This and no more." Only the rain and the storm brewing over swaying treetops answered and he fell to his knees thinking God, in her perfection and by design, was deaf.

And the people of the Forest said: *she will know her weakness and think it good.*

Taking comfort in the storm to come he gained valour and stood on the edge of the temple, hair blowing with rising winds. He witnessed the grey of trees consumed by gales, rain and thunder. He stepped unto the waters and bathed under them and, when it was done and the clouds cleared, his sights were renewed.

He carried forth towards Summanus.

The journey was long and the Forest dense. He decided not to eat nor drink without the Erelia's permission and, after the second night, his stomach settled and his body relaxed. There was no more pain and soon he learned to eat from

what fell to the ground. Water, fruit and meat eventually came to rest at his feet and on its own and could be taken without angering the Spirits. Finally, on the seventh night and beyond the stark ridge of a stony hill, he found the border between the living and the dead.

Summanus was not a tempest, as common Templar believed, but a slowly moving emptiness, inching its way in and out of the Forest like a tide; a cosmic shore on the fringes of planetary life.

He climbed down the hill through the trees and unto a meandering beach where the earth turned from green to burnt silver. He stood before the palpable frontier, a cloud-formed mirror, staring at the world of the living. It was peace made tangible, tranquillity in its purest form. Standing close one could look beyond into a desolate land, like the surface of a barren moon. Van reached in, breaking the surface tension between two worlds, and saw his hand reach the misty mirror. He was touching Summanus and, as he realised it, his skin reddened and seared. Tiny boils appeared in instants and with them a jolt of pain that climbed up his elbow. Air escaped his lungs and he collapsed to his knees, retrieving his hand to see it steaming, shivering cold and contracted, like dried fruit, with boils and reddened wounds.

Summanus could not be touched, lest it drained you of life.

Looking within he smiled thinking that in such a place God would be unable to find him. A painful death was, still, unfitting to his cowardly nature and he could not die so close to the border, lest he be found. Lest he be defiled. He bandaged his hand with a rag from his skirt and looked back whence he came. Knowing what to do he turned his sights to the Relic-temple, far hidden by distance, mist and Forest. He walked back up the hill and into the valley, down the river and through the forest, up the ridge and down again. He did this as many times as needed to find the temple. Finally he stood, once more, under its black walls. It lay as he had last seen it, wet from the weeping clouds, its rotten steel beautifully deformed by time.

And the people of the Forest said: *she will know to retrace her steps and learn that she's been wrong.*

His figure was bones and skin; face gaunt and wasted by inanition. Still, there was a drive in him, a certainty that whatever energy lay inside would be wasted if not used before the hour of his end. Fueled by his dream of a perfect death he was now inevitably brave. He walked in like a master returning home and stepped before the Unborn.

The snake-relic writhed with anger.

The instant its senses took hint of him the Ecko snapped its jaws and threw the length of its body to him with murderous intent. Knowing the risk Van made a Terminus, joining palms before his heart, and fell to his knees, whispering God's name. If his Fire was strong the Unborn would be tamed. If not he would

die and the world would lose nothing of value.

He closed his eyes and hoped.

He hoped past the point of regret and felt his heart beat beyond feared consequence.

The shadow of the Unborn passed through him and then a breeze, but nothing more. The slithering body of the creature coiled around a pillar and Van sighed relieved. Fearful that his Fire had but stunned the serpent, and with great care, he reached out and took the Armoria. It still covered the bones of the creature's previous master. One does not need a weapon to die, so the knife he left behind.

Once outside he dressed with the Relic-armour.

He made sure to fix all straps around thighs, waist, arms and neck and placed the breathing mask on its hook near the collarbone. The moment he placed the Reliquarium, a small black sphere, in the slot near his left ribs, the Armoria awakened and wrapped around him like a lover. The suit-armour caught to him with a cold embrace, its metal fabric thin, a skin over his skin. When it was done, steam breathing out the sealing crevices, he felt protected for the first time in months and smiled. He carried the helmet in his hands, long white hair loose against his dressed body, and thought himself a worthy sight.

Walking down the stairs and away he heard a noise and saw the white snake slithering near his side, in timid wait. It had followed him out the temple and now stared with lidless eyes.

Afraid, Van took a stick and struck the ground near the Ecko until it moved back, shrieking and hissing, and got lost under a boulder.

Driven only by the religious desire of mastering his own death, Van returned to Summanus. It was a long journey made short by the comfort of the Relic dressing him in warmth. When he stood again before the fringes of his world and the hour of his death he placed the breathing mask, chromed and adorned like the snout of a beast, under his chin and over his mouth and nose. He connected the two tubes to the armour's nape cylinder, a container of sorts, and took a deep, metallic breath. Stale air filled his lungs. It would be, he thought, the last of that dry substance he required. Then he placed the helmet on, the crest like a demon's mane, neatly locking against all Relic parts. A visor glass manifested as if from thin air turning everything blue and clear, like underwater. The Relic covered his body from toes to crown. All he was and all he breathed contained.

He stepped forth and Summanus received him with a gentle pull and its ominous silence. He could hear only the sound of his heart and the air that kept it beating. Soon, somewhere in that endless desert, it would stop and no one would ever find the body of the last man of Ormus, not even God.

And the people of the Forest said: *we listen, we watch, we care.*

Chapter 10 – Saviour

Only through the exploration of the senses can one learn Fire. To reach out and touch without fingers, to hear without ears, and see without eyes; to find the world in its pleasure and pain, living and dying before your sense of self. To fully be in contact with your feelings and the forms of touch your soul devised for the purpose of living. For once it is learned, this is what you lose. The cost of Fire is the world before you, the gift is the world that will be.
As written in the Seed of Foundation–
Phase 245, Chapter (300,891); Fire and the Loss of Our Senses

3402 AT

When Caelestis was not gliding through the skies in his mother's windship he was swimming somewhere near the shores of Altavida. Icy waters broke against the black stones where he swore to peasant and lordling alike he had seen a dragon and swam with it. He often told them strange tales of who he was. For some he had been a dirty peasant boy. To others he was the son of a forgotten hero or a foreigner, come from worthier lands where culture was more than the throwing of a net at shallow sea and the drinking of corn ferment with spice. He enjoyed the lying and the fooling of those around him. It made him feel in control, like his true self was not here, just somewhere else, arriving but never quite present.

Never quite awake.

The past year was not like this. He was Erelim now so he spent it in castle Eisengraise in the company of his aunt and his brother Darien. In the quiet way of the Eisen-folk, he, like them, mourned for mother and took care of their wilful baby sister.

Iori was a fierce creature that cried too much and glared harshly at the world, like something was missing from it. It was, of course, but how could she know and how soon? It made him wonder of her brilliance and her strength to be. Servants, he noticed, found it hard to care for her, even Servitors breaking before her screams and the hazes of Fire she would spout across invisible air. The Belshazar brothers, despite their duties and training, tried to keep near, always careful not to make her sad nor cry for that mother she had all but known. Now, close to a year after the incident that made him Erelim, things were changing and too fast. He spent his time, mostly, in the great hall where the king would sit, dressed in regal form, and overlooking papers he branded, when instructed, with the ring he wore. It was a daily chore and a bore.

So, you're the king, his uncle's whispering voice rushed into his mind as he entered the great hall of Eisen too early one morning. He found the man standing by one of the longest windows, intricate iron fences drawing with shadow against the blue light of the stained glass. It queered his face to a half-formed

grin.

“Hello uncle,” he said with a bow.

The man stepped out of the gloom and smiled wide. *You seem well, ‘Blinks.’ Why not, he turned to the great windows once more, you’re now prince of Eisengraise. Ruler of a kingdom as vast as seven domains in fourteen planets. Do you even know what that is, a planet? Can one person truly know it, I wonder?*

“You seem upset,” he told him, walking to the centre of the hall.

My joy for your coronation betrays the tears I shed for your mother. The mind’s voice came bitter, modulated to a whizzing whisper.

The words hurt him so he looked away, ashamed of the seat and title he was taking and from whom.

One can never be too sad, Jacob continued, but I smile, or try I guess. “Ugh,” the man almost spat the noise from his broken chords, what can an eight year old know of pains like that?

“I’ve been hurt,” he said, shyly.

The man’s left cheek twitched as he tried for another false smile so he looked away and to that simple chair they called the regent’s seat. *Kay Tal Uhs, the man gestured with his hand, no longer using his costly telepathy. You have forty lords or more to salute today. Get dressed!* The last gesture was a finger to his dirty shirt.

“I think I won’t,” Caelestis defied the man, walking across the hall and standing over the pit where a great bonfire would soon burn. Before the lords came the great chamber would be warm and bright and smelling of man and his labour. “My father says Sil are meant to be humble. You can wear the jewels, uncle, and I can bear the title.”

You wound me, Blinks. I’d rather sit in that chair, and you know it. Make me your regent. What matters to you? Sil never return. I can be a great ruler here. Do it, Blinks, and I shall—

“Don’t call me that!” his little voice echoed in the hall and already he was covering his left eye.

But everyone does, the man whispered in his mind, coming near. Why not me? We’re family, you and I, and you’re too little to merit a man’s name. Blinks will do, won’t it? Suits your wounded eye. You see, he knelt to level their gazes, I know a thing or two about wounds, and family... and betrayal. I’ve a son too. Pretty sure he was the Erelim... until you came along. It was a reason to smile. Was, ha! Was is such a sad word, isn’t it?

Caelestis stepped back from the deformed face, but the man’s hand pulled him close.

Blinks, you’re no Erelim, are you? Just got lucky, didn’t you?

He had to nod. It’s how he felt; a farce, a liar. He who had failed at saving a mother would now occupy the Throne of the most powerful kingdom in Inuvel.

How many million square kilometres was that? How many planets did he say? Suits me right to become a Sil.

Did your father help you? Confess!

“No. I was just... fortunate.”

Your story is mine, backwards, Jacob spat into his mind, like a rotten thought made his. *But you can make it right. You can give me what's been denied. 'T'was my son. My Cypher, who's the Erelim! Fight him. Prove to us that you're the—*

“For all I am, uncle,” the eight year old said, “I bear you no ill. I know your troubles. I know your passion. You would be a good king... for a different people.”

The man stood, keeping his one eye on him. *Too wise these words from a child. Where did you hear this? Who's told you to say thus?*

“Leave the boy alone, Jacob,” María Teresa spoke from the opposite corner. “He's your king now. Can't keep bullying him like you used to.”

Jacob smiled at her and then at him. *Old habits, my lady of Montserrat.*

The woman was followed by a busy entourage of Eisen's commerce council and the national treasurers and accountants. She took long strides towards them and smiled at him with a kind glare in her black eyes. She was young and beautiful and the envy of that silent, deformed man that now stepped back with scorn.

“Yours,” she told Caelestis as she showed a gold lined black parchment with the Patriarch's seal. “Adolf's given you the protectorate of three disputed Gardens in the galactic frontier with Arindel.”

“To me?”

“And recognition, with right of taxation, of demilitarised zones near the southern borders in every contested territory.” She touched the parchment with a gentle finger. “He's also given you a title, in Sara's name, and spiritual bond over a creature. Do you know what it means?”

He nodded. “Father's master of horses,” he said. “What's my animal?”

“The Wolf,” she brushed a hand down his golden hair, “whom, some said, were heard howling before your arrow saved God, all across Solaria.”

Caelestis looked at his dirty hands before taking the large parchment.

The new prince of Belshazar, Jacob gestured with his hands, *Master of Wolves. Blinks, you've already conquered more than your grandfather and done more than the Patriarch himself and with a single arrow! Blessed are we.*

“Are we?” María Teresa said to him with worry. “Arindel bleeds and Inuvel feeds from it. Adolf takes from one to pamper the other. This'll destabilise his beloved peace, the fool. *Un tonto,*” she added in her Arisian tongue.

But Arindel agreed, Jacob gestured with deft hands. *The world rejoices for Moshayim. There'll be no conflict.*

Will they care as much when their children starve? María Teresa asked in his own way, but her hands moved slowly and with practised grace. “We now run their granaries,” she spoke for all to hear. “That means we tax them, but our taxes will not reach them, not in roads or protection, or the financing of the dams and the keeping of the walls. I wonder if it’s fair to do such, just for a boy.”

Why do you care so much for the enemy?

“They’re not the enemy, Jacob,” the woman replied. “And I know my share of weakness and what it does to the strong.”

A weakened people can try to act, but it will be a circus act. Our boy has given the Empire more than any conqueror.

“I’m not afraid of what Arindel can do. As you say they are weakened and will be weaker every year because of this. I fear what Inuvel will try to do.”

A clever girl, you are Teresa. You fear not for the weak but the strong.

“I dislike bullies,” she told him with finality. “And I fear we may soon become one, unless we’re somehow ruled by better angels than I’ve known.” She looked at Caelestis, still holding the black parchment.

Jacob gave a glaring look at his nephew. *Everyone loves him.* The last gesture was a finger to his face.

It was left at that.

Caelestis was too young to understand. For months he had sat atop Verchiel, Throne of Eisengraise, holding the family Bastion in one hand and a Reliquarium on the other. He sat again that evening, thinking of it and of how dangerous it all sounded. The Sil by his side, Aesen Farn, was tall and quiet, patient as soft morning, and willing to bend like grass under the wind. The man was immersed, body and mind, in Kay Tal Uhs, the Saluting of the Lords, but Caelestis was somewhere else, in the thoughts of what his life would be.

Celebrations were organised but he didn’t care for them. He walked, instead, alone and weary, over the great halls, guiding his dog as it played with roses the freemen had thrown at him until the floor was blood red and with the scent of cut grass. That night and to end the ceremonies of his Sil Transcendence, the Imperium sent a vast display of falcons for him to choose. Each Erelim had one, a symbol of their allegiance to the galactic consortium called the Imperium. A hundred arquebusiers in yellow robes, holding long rifles in one hand and a hunter falcon on the other, waited for a signal from their master, a fat ambassador called Theoric Aventia. With a word they set the falcons to flight.

Then they fired.

The birds took height near the sea shore and fell, pellets through their wings. Ice, snow and sand, as black as soil, drank of it with little to show. Only few of the birds survived and a large female peregrine, white and grey like the clouds of Eisen, was brave enough to plunge down for a strike. Some swore

she had plucked an eye from a marksman. She was gifted to Caelestis, who was mad and saddened at the Rite of the Fiercest and who cried holding the bird and thinking of its brethren.

For his mother he called her Emris, meaning *the Fast*.

He walked that night across the beach and back again, Titan running free and barking and playing with the cold waves. He walked with his brother. He walked with his aunt. He walked with his uncle. He walked with that girl he liked, the one he never knew, and her cat. He walked with his father and his mother. He walked with his sister and her husband, and their children. It was all in his head, that endless walk of naked feet against the sand. He walked alone until the water hit against the wall and the drizzle was the sea and the wind and his dream of staying home.

He faced the terror of that second ocean, the largest a man can face. He looked up at the tiny shores of other worlds and its great expanse. He was afraid of it, of the deepness despite the starry fields. Once, when he was little, he dared swim too far and was pulled down to the bottom of an angry current. He struggled to swim up. He tried to beat the sea but his strength was a boy's and the world whispered *no*. A freeman pulled him out with a smile and others laughed and joked. He knew then that, in his terror, he had seen a dark monster while they had seen the truth of it. He tried now, tried hard, to see the shallowness of deep space, the perspective that shrunk it all and made it bearable. He tried yet a tear coursed down his face and there was no one, for she was gone, to wipe and clean and kiss him calm.

"I'll be brave," he promised to the wind, where she must have been. "I'll face it all with a smirk and a smile." He joined hands to make what the Templar called the Terminus. Electricity flowed down his body and up his weary limbs, like he had struck every nerve. He was known as the Candle-boy, the Blinker with a broken eye, who had not the Fire in him to be born right nor to have the Blessing of the fair and noble. He was called the Breeze when others were the Gale. To journey across the Apsu and to another planet he would have to be, at least, the Wind.

Titan barked and whimpered and cried when he drew his hand over another freezing wave. He was naked now. What matters, the burden of that fine clothing and those heavy jewels? *All but baggage*, he thought, *nothing but weight*.

He was swimming as far as he could, searching, finding in every stroke and every dive, a glimpse of that feeling he had lost and had felt only for instants when his mother spoke of the future. He swam and swam thinking the energy for a return to the beginning would be worthless. He would not need it. He would swim across the sea or he would die and that would make him a man worthy of the stars. If he could reach the other shore, one way or another, then he could travel to that distant planet where God lived and be as had been intend-

ed for him by time and the wills of men.

He swam against bitter waves that pulled him down and then again before those that drove him back. It came soon, the notion that the sea was calm and welcoming. Far from the shore of Eisen, where he had seen nothing but water and the cerulean sky mirrored against it, he found a great shallow of stone and sand. He stood there, breath steaming out, panting like a beast and looking back at the castle and the little town. Turning he found the two great beyonds, a horizon that seemed endless and flat, and the great empty above.

That's when he heard a noise and saw a figure swimming his way.

He wanted to hide, but where? He thought of the journey across and what remained of it, but thought the swimmer would get tired. What if it was another freeman? They barely have Fire in them, a spark where I hold a candle. He would not lure a man to his death so he stayed and waited and watched Ser Julius Octavian rise naked from the waters.

"Uncle!" he cried, though this man was no uncle to him but her parents' true friend.

"My boy," the man said, offering a wide smile. "What a view!"

Caelestis stopped shy of the man's shadow under the moonlight. "You're not... angry?"

Julius took his time to answer. It was his way. His father's best friend and most loyal advisor was also the wisest and kindest man he had ever met. He could not remember a time without him, without that smile under the beard, and those eyes, always candid and fresh. When Julius became angry he became quiet and pensive and somehow even kinder. It was his way.

"Why are you here, Cae? What are you looking for?"

It was his time to think, but the motive would never come. "I was... trying to be brave, uncle."

"Aye, and you were. Nigh a man I know would dare this swim and this cold. But why?"

He whimpered, for some reason, and found he had been crying.

"My boy," Julius knelt and took him in his warm embrace. "I know. I understand."

And he must have, for the man did not say another word and they both waited for the great depths of sea and sky to merge with a coming storm. They swam back together, finding the shore's black sand frozen and hard.

"Will you tell my aunt?" he asked him, as Julius dressed him in a warm robe.

"She already knows."

"You told her?"

The man nodded. "I told her a man makes a kingdom like a kingdom makes a man. It's your time now to be that man. Too soon, I think. Too soon for you

to have lost your mother and too soon to leave your home. Too soon, my boy, but that's what makes us human. Every challenge comes too soon, like the next wave. We cannot wait to be ready."

"How did you know I'd be out there?"

"Cycles within cycles, Cae. We Sil know the past too well. Others like you have been drawn to the sea. It's a challenge that stares at us from the time of beginning."

"You can see the future?"

The man shook his head and smiled, patting his head. They both started up the rocky stairs to the castle. "Only the past. But you'd be surprised how much of the future is there. How much you can do with just feeling it, tapping into the great memory."

"Will I learn to do that?"

"All Erelim Sil do." The man waited in silence for them to reach the first marble terrace. Then he looked at him with a grave stare of his bright blue eyes. "Those that truly want it, that is. Those who are not afraid of it."

"Do you know what I'll be? What I'll become?"

Julius Octavian gave a worried look into his eyes. "Only you can truly know that. I would not tell you if I knew... if I could know. That only means your story is still to be written and you must be its author. You have to make it yourself because, in the end, you are your own maker, my boy, responsible for all your crimes and all your kindness. All of it. Whatever you do, good or bad, it'll be in your care." He knelt to level his eyes on his. "What do you wish to become?"

"I don't know." He almost wept saying it. He had wanted to cry, to continue crying; for his mother, for his sister whom he would never truly know, for his brother and Titan, and his aunt; for his father and Julius who looked at him now with the love of the world. "I want to be kind."

"A hard road that is," Julius smiled. "It won't ennoble you. It won't make you any better than the rest. But it'll weigh on your soul."

"Is it really that hard?"

"The enemy of a kind spirit is the pointlessness we face in the shadow of time. Nothing we do truly matters but as a speck, a mote of dust in the emptiness of space. Can you be kind, giving away your comforts, when it won't matter in the end? One day all this will be gone. Life will fade away; time will end long after the universe has cooled and gone to sleep. Everything'll be forgotten. Long before that, you'll have died. Some may remember you, but most won't. You'll be as nothing. As alive as you were before birth. What will kindness give you that is worth a life? Nothing..." the man waited, his smile deepening with an honesty he had rarely seen. "Everything, my boy. This choice you make, if it's real, born out of the love your mother left for you and your family deserves,

if it's made by the part of you that can only be honest, even when facing death, yours will be a life worth the world and everything in it. If this is the Erelim you'll become, my Cae, then your failures and sins, your misgiving and crimes, will never stop me from loving you."

In such spirit, Caelestis left the mountain, the sea and his home-planet.

He journeyed once more to the city of God. A sense of joyous nostalgia made him tear up as he said farewell to his siblings, to his aunt and uncle, to Julius Octavian, and to the servants and their children. And, as his planet disappeared beyond a window for a second time, he thought of his mother and the things so easily given and so easily taken.

Chapter 11 – Messenger

And they lay on the ship of dreams closing their eyes with the certainty they would be carried aloft to space, where God awaited. But in their hurry to sleep they dared not open their eyes and in death found nothingness; not the heaven they awaited, not the God they expected, not the dream they had hoped for.

*As written in the Seed of Foundation—
Phase 241, Chapter (292,665); The Nature of Dreams*

3402 AT

A world of worlds contained. Planets with tiny patches of green lay scattered over a mostly empty galaxy. Solaria. Solaria of the many suns. Solaria, the last.

Orphaned, the galaxy journeyed like a spiralling wonder in the midst of a universe too small and unknown, empty of light; a collection of black holes in an almost complete vacuum of decaying principles. Solaria was the sole survivor of entropic extinction wrought through unavoidable cosmic heat death. It found solace, safety, and calm only under the warm light of God and her power to reignite the stars.

A hundred Gardens, planets of green, blue and white, were home to the mountain, the water, the tree, the beast, the Relic and the man. In this hierarchy of life, humanity stood the highest with God's creatures near as brothers. Relics served but only because they, like the wood that burns, were tools for the endurance of life. Created by God to inhabit the universe, Relics, like seeds, were found only underground or drifting through the Apsu. The Dormin, largest of Relics, adorned the world with their intricate parts. Made in the form of gods and creatures, their bodies hovered in the Apsu or rested in shallow graves and deep caverns; gears and cables, screens and frames scattered by time and the motions of planetary tectonics. Explorers often delved into caves only to realise it was metal made, its parts rusted and petrified by time, Dormin-veins merged with the mountain and the landscape.

Their smaller kin, the Luviana Relics, were of many sizes and birthed for many purposes. Over the grounds, under the moss and over the roots of trees, petrified cables lay sprawled like snakes; glass screens were covered in black soil, bush and moss. Near rivers and staring out from the black of lakes their silver frames shone under the sun as forests grew and valleys deepened.

Towns and villages were made, not built, near Relics too large or too old to be revived, house and temple alike formed from the matter of their being and moulded by the invisible hands of God. In these God-made settlements, united by labyrinthine caverns like the empty arteries of a leviathan, the Templar lived in awe of God's creation and in fear of what lay beyond. And, in those places

where the people rarely went and where Relics were yet to be discovered, unearthed and awakened, something more grew by their side.

It started that quiet night in which God's Thirty-fourth incarnation slept under the protection of men for the first time. It was in that moment that strange crystal spheres, eggs of light, burned their way into existence.

Inside, beating hearts matured.

*

The masked man came close to witness the growth of one of these glass wombs. He found no peace in it but energy and change taking form. Light travelled inwards, it seemed, from the hard glass exterior to the beating heart, forming the flesh, skin and organs of a tiny creature. Its half-formed body showed a core fusing light into something warm, cerulean in colour and terrifying. Timid scales and sharpened fangs shimmered, skin like bark. The semblance of wings, a long tail and a large reptilian body spoke of draconic features. The form responded to the history. It was not a genetic result, for Fire builds in memory, but something distinctly human. Its memetic form, like everything else, like the Dormin and the Luviana, were history-bound.

For it to mature, the crystal egg would have to grow.

Already glassy appendages had taken root and spread, like a thick milky web. The egg would continue to grow both into the soil and up to the heavens, like a fountain, like a tree, until the beast inside was of age.

With his demonic guise, strong armoured hands, and long grey and white capes, the Messenger seemed more a machine than a man, but there was wonder in his eyes. He wore the same armour, the same cloaks and the same mask as the day he took Sara from her mother's hands and the day he found Gabriel amongst all men and granted him power only true God should bear. Though covered in steel and shielded from a world he desperately wanted to love, there was warm blood flowing within. He hopped off a black destrier, the animal's semblance in want of peace, and walked into a pond of shallow water, steam flowing out his monstrous mask.

By his side stood a black wolf, regal in stance and daring in walk. Its glowing green eyes betrayed its mechanical nature, thin lines of radiance stretching from its cheeks down neck and nape. The Ecko, a sentient Relic, took one additional step to stand between the man and the creature that slept within the malformed crystal.

But there was nothing to fear. The place was peaceful and still. The crystal's light gave the clearing eerie hues to dance with and sporadic gushes of lightning sparked unto the snow, leaving traces where ice turned to mist and water. Around the egg and surrounding the pond it had created, scrubs, flowers and small plants sprouted. The crystal had formed an atmosphere of tender warmth where life could grow.

The wolf Ecko scoured the place with mechanical senses and when its humming green eyes had scanned the crystal, it spoke. "There are approximately seven to the power of nine imperfections. Geometrical growth has begun, but it is still slow."

The Messenger waited for a breeze and the change of light from day to night. It seemed to him the passing of time was the voice of the world and the changing light the words of a mother he longed to obey.

"The creature grows well," the wolf asserted after many hours had passed in silence. "Seven years to maturity. Perhaps more."

"Tell them," the Messenger said at last with his voice of thunderous wind. "Speak to them of the time of beginning." The sleeping eyes of the embryo inside the glass twitched with life. "And remind them that this should be the last cycle."

The Ecko nodded and its eyes shimmered with the reflection of the creature inside its crystal shell.

– End of part I –