

## – Part 1 –

“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.”

## Prologue

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

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, through the fields of white, a woman ran and a man followed.

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

Kneeling in the snow, the woman pressed close the gentle body of her child offering, in whispers, the dreams and wishes she would never see fulfilled. Her eyes sharp, a blend of anguish, terror and resolve, settled in the dark distance where a shadow turned the dark to grey. There, a man like winter, clad for silence and with clutches of steel, watched. He waited for the mother to understand there was no other way. It was time, that most elusive substance, who was at fault. Time and the collective choices of a billion billion souls wanting to endure. Still, she clung to hope even as the forest insisted with its subtle roar that death has small beginnings. Her baby's dark eyes smiled at her from between her shivering arms and it was enough for that final lesson on the future to be learned.

From the swallowing distance, like the unavoidable sunrise of a dying star, the man approached, a predator upon its prey. A hunt finished where a feast would begin. But when he stood over her, hands like claws, a breeze passed between them. It was a song of loss and joy, and with it his intent was spirited away. He was struck with the burden of empathy and the moment took life of its own. Human eyes bent with pity, their shimmer dimming from behind the mask.

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

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

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 eyes of her child. “Give us time.”

The mask was dark, the eyes behind it closed to light but for a single bead, like a star in the black. He nodded and remained still, as if all things had forgiven him and the arrow of fate had stopped.

*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 and 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 by mournful happiness, as if they wanted to cry and scream and laugh all at once.

Knights knelt swearing allegiance, kings and emperors bowed and 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.

“I live under the light of God,” each man had sworn. “I stand joyous and proud. I breathe the Fire of God; I speak the truth always. I bear God’s Blessing; I safeguard the helpless and do no harm. I am a builder of God’s dream; I endure when defeated, I am brave when fearful, I am wise in failure, I am humble in victory, and I am as God intended.”

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, a star falling for the first time through the black canvas of the night. 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, like shards of something broken being remade, and when the girl extended her hand it pressed its forehead onto her palm.

She smiled.

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.

No one could sense it, for there was none but her who had awakened, but 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 sphere appeared. A heart beat in its interior and roots of crystal took 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, he learned of pain and joy and so determined, as said before by the wise, that nothing happens to a man which he is 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 would regret 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 lips silenced. He had told her of an important day, the most, he thought, since the birth of their daughter. And in such spirit, his day started.

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. He 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, Ser Alfonse Joria'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.

The knight watched from his stallion's saddle. Wearing green over grey, Ser Alfonse smiled proud, surely imagining tank-tracks prowling through the mud of another conquered land. "Is it ready?" the man asked, joining palms. A wilful command and the engine roared to life, the glass core at its heart passing the lord's energy to every corner of the machine.

Oil stained hands turned the Relic off with the turn of a handle. He nodded, not to the lord but his scribe. Candlelight projected shivering shadows unto the stone walls and an Anzil Reader wrote on a log what the lord could not. Another Steed of canon and steel added to the list.

"Well done, lad," the knight said. "A fine job. Lord Judeaw's host awaits, you know? 'Tis an important day."

The man dared ignore the knight's recognition.

"I's talking to you, Exile," the knight said, drawing his horse close until the smell of its breath struck him. "Did well, you did. These cannons 'll burn God's enemies, 'cause of you."

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

"Not used to Steeds in battle yet, are ya, Exile?" the squire teased but the man carried forth. It was, he agreed with the lord, 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 Relic so as to pass unto it 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, like him, wanting 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 powers that be 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 next 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 make do?"

"The lord 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."

With black-stained hands and sweat on his brow, Gabriel entered his cabin, kissed his wife, sat for lunch and felt his child greet him with a tug.

"Are we monsters?" she 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 their beliefs.”

“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 name.

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

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 between them rattled.

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 in a moment 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 under the autumn drizzle with the careless 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 loaned it from lord Jiudeaw. Signed the contract not two days ago. 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.

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 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 realized 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 the warm fingers of her father. “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. “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.

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,” she said. “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 a serf. 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 in his lap, 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; passive 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, as if through cold water.

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.

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 wheel and standing on the accelerator. The engine roared, hard as it could, but the enemy insisted. A second ray of cannon fire tried to

anticipate him. Gabriel jerked the wheel and started away from collision, but it came too close.

A third ray would surely hit them.

Fingers wrapped around the wheel with unceasing grip, despite the feeling of an emptiness sworn, pressing on his immediate thoughts. It was as if a question had risen from the earth, turning him with doubt. A choice was all that remained. 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.

The wheel, the windship and his life spun out of control when the tank's ray struck the hind frame. Flames erupted all around and the explosion stole his words when burning winds crawled inside. 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 bone 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 scuttled through his face as he reached the burning vessel. Engulfed in flames, the Relic looked at him like an accidental murderer, 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 all that was.

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

His wife looked at the child with a whimper stuck in her eyes. 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 into her chest 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.

He 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. The tender love and care she offered set over him like a blanket in a cold night. 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 dance. 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, painted across the tank's hull and the crest of a noble family: a wall and a spear, flying in the wind. He 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 the rain guard.

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

"Please," Gabriel whispered, but he talked, 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. For 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 is 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 eyes and mind were stuck to something that hovered above, like a cloud, like a dream.

“Should an Exile merit God’s mercy?” the knight asked, this time demanding his attention by pressing the searing fire-blade close to his face, burning flesh to a scar.

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 flame 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. 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, fear and calm drawn into a single expression of violent peace.

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

“You are 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. For an instant, 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 realizing 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 for. 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 cold nose appeared behind the dark. The pup whimpered by his feet setting big eyes on him, whites like moons. 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 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 Valheim clan, waited for news on his mother from a hanging terrace of stone. He was robed in black and white, golden locks of hair loose and flapping with the winds.

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 stone and the clouds were the living spirits of the land, spectres restless and alert, creating a commotion in the skies over the stormy sea. Remains of God-machines, the Omnis and Luviana Relics, embellished the landscape.

They had names 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 Weltall, with its black frame, resting over Vierge, like a pearl. There was Andvari, with its rusted red, and Crescens, 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, gears the size of trees stuck out of the ground as if a giant overlord had broken his cosmic watch. Moonlight

reflected on them like they were jewels in the black. As if starshards had fallen from the sky, burning silver.

Upon mountains, valleys, rivers and planetary orbits, in the midsts of fiefs, domains and kingdoms, millions upon millions of machines waited for their time to be awakened by the hands of men, like a slave awaits the whip. They had lain for so long upon the planetary 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.

Caelestis dared a look into the black halls of the castle. What happened inside, the screams of his mother and her maidens, made him angry. 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.

During this time, only the noble-blooded could breathe life into the machines, and that for a short time and at great cost. And Caelestis was one like them. A member of an ancient clan and natural bearer of Fire.

The first sign of his powers came to him after his baptismal ceremony, when he was no more than three. 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, spoke up. 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, the eye would barely open until he was six when, by the efforts of his teachers, he learned to control his blessing and heal himself so as to see. 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, 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 condemned, 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. 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.

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, but Caelestis thought 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 from his place near God.

Caelestis sighed with the thought, and a sense of loneliness took him, first by the arms, 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 wood, whistling winds and dancing drapes and was warm and void of whispers. Only in a single candle-lit room did people talk 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 failed, the sight of his sweating mother turning 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, 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,” the woman 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 older brother’s hand.

Darien seemed lost. He had a book in hands 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 arm. Together, they walked to one of the castle’s private shrines.

The walls here were made of carved stone and steel. Symbols, stories and legends, some said, as old as the planet's core created shivering shadows under the tapestries. The steel was painted black and decorated with sapphire blue, the clan's colour. Marble floors were ingrained with images, like pale frescoes under a sheet of glass. 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, whereupon cultured tapestries they waited to be dusted off and placed back again, never to be used.

On the way to the shrine, lady María Teresa de Montserrat had told them the story of the 'Calculating Prophet', but there was not 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 of 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 Valheim clan,” lady Montserrat said when the prayer was done. “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. “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.”

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

“God will make her 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 calmly, “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,” she said.

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. 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 Valheim

after him and, if you are Moshayim, your line will be strong and your mother will be proud. Wherever she goes.”

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.

“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 would fly,” Caelestis said, his lips 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 when 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. Hundreds of cables hung down from the ceiling, covered, in part, by even more tapestries moving with the winds. A single chandelier rocked like a bell.

With little 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.

He tapped on the floor with his boot’s toecap, making sure they fit tight and took the ladder to climb into the cockpit. 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 Valheim, Erelim of Eisengraise, 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," the man said. "Words of our house. 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's 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–*

3401 AT

Pride made the walls of Eisengraise and devotion to God defined the man under the cloak. Aldemar Valheim 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 hill of stone covered in roses, the sleeping maiden inside, like an angel afloat a swarm of wings. Freemen 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 looked 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 voice. 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 domain too old and large to count, Lord General of the Knights of Sil and now widow to Amara de Montserrat. He had never been a good husband and the loss seemed a missed opportunity to someday be one.

There was a soft drizzle that morning and thick mists over the cemetery field. Aldemar held the baby, Iori Ana, of not two days of age, in his arms and wore a finely knit, yet old and grey shawl over his shoulders, the *ruana* of the Sil. Its thick cloth in

stark contrast to his rank as king. With it, he protected the child, his beard heavy with dewdrops like pearls.

His second son, Caelestis Adolf, cried by the foot of the grave as serfs pushed wet soil over the coffin with their naked hands. In his arms, he carried a pup, fur silver and short, with large paws and kind blue eyes. Amara's gift? Surely, 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 children wore thick glasses, leaning slightly to one side and misty with rain.

"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, the lords who knew Amara by name and reputation sat over cushioned chairs under crimson umbrellas held fast by eager vassals. They longed for a semblance of recognition from her visiting husband and king.

*Why must death be so political?* Aldemar wondered, looking at them.

As Erelim, he had been chosen to rule his house but decided instead to join the Knights of Sil as *Protector Divino*, guardian knight and praetor of Araboth. He had but one duty, the protection and safekeeping of Teresa the Thirty-third and now Sara the Thirty-fourth. So it had been that regent queen Amara assumed power in Eisengraise, land of the Winter Rose, which bloomed but once every hundred years. Without her and with

two underaged boys and a baby girl, the lot of governing rested on Aldemar's shoulders once more.

*Will you leave the Sil and return, my brother?* asked Jacob, his brother, while the people made a line to throw black soil over their lady's pit. His lips did not move, but his hands wrote the words in rhythmic motions, fingers dancing, palms waving to and fro. The man 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 from one side to another, speechless.

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

"I want no regent," Aldemar said, and then gestured with his free hand. *Let the maidens rule in council... for now.*

*You mourn, brother,* Jacob replied. *Your kingdom 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 they prove to be the Erelim?*

"Then Eisengraze will be theirs," Aldemar spoke as if reading a law written in stone. "You're my brother, not my rival."

*I grieve for you, Aldemar,* Jacob said, hands moving heavily. *We all do, but a kingdom cannot wait and kings must not mourn.*

Aldemar did not answer. Instead, he offered his gaze and hand to his first son. The boy took it but dared not look. *Only Darien can understand,* Aldemar thought, for only he was old enough to see in his mother's death more than a vacant throne. *Will you be my Erelim?* Aldemar wondered, but even as he held the boy's hand he knew there was no such drive in him.

His second son 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 the Blessing was weak in him. He held but 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.

“Who comes?” a maid warned, turning north and pointing.

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 bandanna and pleading for Audience. Aldemar recognised the falcon in his arm, bearing the emblem of Anges. It brought a message from the north.

“My Lord General,” the courier hopped off and knelt before him, gasping for air. “Sire, apologies to you and 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.

*Speak*, Jacob signalled with his chin, when Aldemar wouldn't.

“My lord, Barbaroi at the gates of Angevin. They come in the thousands.”

“Taking advantage of the Zodiac Black, are they?” Ser Julius Octavian asked. “It occurs. What more say you?”

“My lord,” the messenger continued. “They're fighting already.”

*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 stand 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.

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

“We are 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 before him. Caelestis stared at Julius with puckered lips, nodding so gently it made him jealous. But more eyes were on him than he cared to count. “Duty makes family,” he told Julius and 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.”

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

“The Zodiac Black blossoms still,” he said. “It’ll not leave us until Sara touches Shemesh, blessed be her soul. The Barbaroi know this and they’ve waited a hundred years. Knights who crave my affection, let me see you. Come and help me show these Barbaroi what flames Templar carry, 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 children’s hands and turning small with every cry. Caelestis braved a step closer, removed his glasses and looked at him, covering his left eye, and trying to smile. Aldemar returned the look knowing what he had to do.

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

\*

The cavalry line stretched into the distance, occasionally straying from the Seed-road north. Numbers protected them. By their side, infantry, flag bearers, charioteers, peddlers and whores all marched in procession. Behind them, in heavy transports of wood and steel, huge tanks were pulled by Percheron horses.

“Why the Relics?” asked a lord in white armour, polished to the nook. “Does our dominus believe the Zodiac Black’ll end soon?”

*Try not to keep your brain so close to your tongue,”* gestured Jacob and ser Alvier, master translator, spoke in his stead, voice grey and bitter. *My brother was not made Lord General by fortune. Battle’ll last and with Zodiac Black’s end, the tide’ll turn in our favour.*

“I just wondered, lord,” the man replied, “if it is our way.”

*It is... since Adolf gave leave. These war machines are sure to change the world. Wouldn’t you agree, brother?*

Aldemar growled. He had little energy to intervene, though if he had, he would have recommended Jacob to keep the expected length of battle undisclosed. Soldiers hardly needed the aggravation.

“Did you hear me, brother?” Alvier spoke in Jacob’s stead, his long face detached from the meaning of his words. “About Steeds and the world?”

“They have already,” Aldemar answered. “We must never drink from the vices of success, though.”

“You think we’ll see Deep-winter?” the lord was taken aback. “Against Barbaroi and using Steeds? We’ll do away with the wretches soon enough.”

“Barbaroi are not as weak as you imagine,” Jacob’s translator said. “They’ve been hardened by the *Forest*. How long, I wonder, would you last in there?”

The knight closed his lips and soured his grin.

Aldemar’s host moved under the shadow of an Omnis Relic. They galloped around the contour of its steel frame, gazing at its crown. It was covered with patches of green with hanging beards spilling drops of clear water.

Joining palms Aldemar offered a silent prayer. His men followed, feeling in this buried Relic, as large as a city block, the presence of God. Élan gathered in the soil at their feet and the

wind around as they joined palms. Electricity moved from them, filtering into the land, and tiny bulbs, nodes, like tumours over petrified walls, burst to light. The Relic woke if only to move rotted, broken parts into screeching choirs. Windmills in its highest towers stirred with the energy offered by the people's prayers.

Jacob approached. *You seem comfortable now*, he told Aldemar with deft hands. *Eager to have left the funeral behind? Or perhaps something else?*

Aldemar found his brother's eyes searching.

*Your family?* Jacob asked. *I know you, Al. You've lost touch with your boys. Worry not, María Teresa is a fine woman and a loving mother... If you were to wish for such a thing.*

Aldemar spurred the horse, leaving Jacob behind. Whatever conversations came after were of such menial importance to him inner musings became a veil to the world. When he woke to the moment and finally took care of what his men could or would say, more than a week had elapsed and he was staring at the valley of Anges and the armies of the enemy.

The Barbaroi spread in disorganized array beyond the road and in the Forest. Their numbers hid in the midst of primaeval trees and groves men would rather never visit. Beyond deep fog, castle Angevin braved the northernmost region of the island and had lain under wide siege for the better part of a month. Lord Velan Muria and his Advitor, Ser Willas, must have rejoiced when they saw Aldemar's host of eight thousand marching near the river.

The procession entered Angevin crossing its moat, banners of the Winter Rose, the crest of Eisen, high and proud. Destriers, knights and tanks, followed by a tired yet eager infantry, gazed at the interior grounds and walls with hushed dread. Many had never been so far north, in the abandoned reaches, where God's light was scarce. Still, if victorious, squires would become knights, knights would see their fiefs extended, lords would gain

favour with their Erelim and the Forest would be pushed back, if only a little. For now, they stared at the tired walls of the inner bailey, lined with crooked trees with white beards clinging near the ground.

During its primordial centuries of birth, Angevin had grown over the river, like a bridge is built over a chasm. Without God's light, however, it was no more than heavy stone and steel over black soil and angry water. Its cannons would not fire, its walls would not rise, its doors would not close and its bridges would not lift. For a year every century, Relics slept and stars blinked red only to be given life again by God. And the people cowered in their rooms.

In this cosmic winter, battles were fought with blade and hammer.

\*

“For the Eisen-folk!” Aldemar's lieutenant, Ser Isan Vall roared on the morrow of first impact. “For the Patriarch, the Imperium and Sara, the Thirty-fourth!”

Eisengraise roared and saluted as they saw Aldemar march afoot over mud and grime and through the thick of infantry lines. Heavy armour, war hammer, its narrow head, polished and clean, and a heater shield with Inuvel's Noble Wolf crest, made him seem larger still, a bear amongst children. He stared somewhere within the Forest.

It was black inside.

Birds and creatures had left, replaced by the presence of the ever-hungry and violent Barbaroi. Their eyes watched from behind masks like the snouts of beasts, their bodies covered in the armor-Relics called Armoria. A Sil's gown, stolen.

“For those who've yet to encounter Barbaroi,” Lord Velan Muria said from his horse as his envoy lifted a flag to be heard. “They use Relics, despite Zodiac Black.” He turned to the infantry and the archers. “Like Sil, they'll have Armorias, but

theirs breathe, so arrows'll be useless without your Fire. Focus, men, and pray well that God may hear you."

"How can they?" a soldier called with sudden anguish. "My lord, how can they use God's power? They're wild-folk—"

"Aye, but they're not atheists," lord Muria said, stroking his long beard. "Not our luck today. And they use the Old Way."

*Blood*, gestured Jacob, his hand turning to the form of a cupped hand near the heart. When his translator spoke the word a murmur spread amongst the lines of men too young to have lived the Separatist Wars. Veterans kept composure and warned them with eyes that would not blink and hands that would not shiver. The Old Way, the use of blood to feed Relics, was a sin the barbarians were willing to ignore and one that made them dangerous.

Aldemar took his destrier's leash and walked it forth to battle, the army moving behind, sweating with apprehension. Those who had once felt confident now thought the year too long and the wait too harsh. Aldemar wanted it this way. Fear summons a man's true self, and it had been a while. Would he recognise himself?

A shadow emerged from the Forest. It was the thin figure of a woman in white Armoria, a suit of thin armour over torso, thighs, breasts, arms and neck. The bearskin on her back hung heavy and, as she moved forth, she lifted a long pole, four metres tall. Alone she stood, braving the army of Eisengraise.

Aldemar noticed the woman's armour, a powered Relic that alone made her superior to his best man. With the hint of a smile, he brushed his fingers down a silver hilt at his belt. He could feel energy gathering, like a memory ready to be claimed on the edges of his mind. These were the battles he liked, the ones that reminded him of Adolf and Julius, of Brant and Seilock and the wars. Here he was free from the oppression of regret, the loss of having what he never wanted, of a life he never planned.

He jumped on his black, the stallion breathing hard, removed the hood from his eyes and lifted hammer and shield. Under his plate armour and using the energy of his Fire, his Armoria activated, sealing crevice and nook.

“Forth!” called Ser Vall and the army moved against the singular woman, rushing to her with violence and scorn. She managed to strike and kill one before her ritual sacrifice ended and when her head had rolled, the infantry of Eisengraise approached the Forest with ire.

Inside it was false-night.

Silent as spiders, Barbaroi descended from treetops or rose from holes in the ground. They used long staffs, blowguns, bows and slings and, through the magic of their Armorias, became strong and quick as jaguars. Aldemar’s cavalry closed flanks on the larger group of near twenty, firing on them until arrow tips and spears broke through the invisible barriers and plates of Relic-armour.

A bearlike warrior stood amongst the mosses and under the beards of branches, withstanding the arrows and claiming one after another with his long pole, hard as steel. The arrows flew true but missed the mark at the last moment, pushed away by his Armoria’s force-field. Aldemar took him in a charge, his stallion leaping as he struck from below, hammer rising and near stopping when it struck the man’s chin and broke skull halfway. The shock in shoulder and elbow rattled him, and the scent of burnt iron and garlic spread like a miasma. Pulverized bone and blood were in the air. In that instant, the glory was over. Though the thirst for battle persisted, somewhere deep, his mind recalled the horror of killing. He had to push the memories away, push so hard there would be no space for new ones to come. Setting eyes on the battlefield, he found scattered groups of murderers against murderers. Crows screaming, winds bellowing between the woods.

Men fell wounded or dead and, in the frenzy, when the Barbaroi gained land and men turned craven, an oak was set aflame with oil; a peasant's trick to anger Erelia in enemy territory.

Upon the sight, both armies retreated.

Fear, deep and angered, was shared by lords, commanders and Barbaroi chiefs alike. It settled in the image of the burning tree, warriors from the two bands gazing up with horror. This was a shared sin, and each prayed in his own way to amend the wrong. But prayer would not suffice and the culprit was hanged and burned. He was fifteen.

Eighty-nine men died that day, two hundred or more were wounded and Aldemar returned bloodied and elated. Night came with howling winds and the army rested before the rains. At night soldiers in the outposts saw the shadow of a beast, tall as a house and with paws as thick as the base of a well. The creature stomped the burning tree until its fires were ash, preventing the Forest from taking flame, and its eyes glared at Angevin, robbing its people of breath.

The Erelia was angry.

Aldemar's council forced three men, said to have collaborated with the burning of the tree, to walk as sacrifice into the beast's jaws. Jacob warned the rest not to harm the Forest. What lurked inside was not their enemy, but it very well could be. After that night the creature was never seen again and the Barbaroi returned with the crows, three weeks later.

More battles came. By the month of Gemini, Forest grounds were thick with mud, bone and blood. The shrine of life had turned. Where there are dead, however, there is food, so Forest creatures merely watched as men bickered and died. At night they feasted.

The elusive enemy often fooled the young into false hopes, but veterans knew and knew well, that Barbaroi had but tasted the scent of battle. On the late morning, fourth of Libra, as the

sun shone over the snow, Aldemar sat on a chair of stone, watching over the handrails of a terrace at the battlefield beyond. Under his bearskin and sable cloak, he was covered in sweat, blood and tinges of desire. He hid it well, with one hand to his temple, the other on his lap, caressing his hammer's head, small and with a pike at its back.

Then he thought of home.

"Jacob," he called to his brother who looked out through a looking glass, surrounded by advisors and messenger falcons, perched on the stone rail. "Let's negotiate. 'Tis time this ends."

Jacob's eyes wanted refusal, but he nodded.

\*

The field was bloody mud, thick and heavy. In a cemetery of flesh, entrails and the wires of buried Relics, king Aldemar Valheim, the crown of his kingdom upon his brow, stood before the priestess of Ankara, leader of a Loudos Tribe in northern Whitegarden.

Amara had been on his thoughts when he decided to parley. Now he stood before a woman like her, tall and fierce, with green eyes under oily black locks. The priestess wore her Armoria, the slick armour like a second skin, black over her white complexion. It caressed her muscles with muscular armour, plates of steel, subsistence wires, and breathing tubes. She took the chromed steel mask in the form of a snarling beast's snout off, the glass before her eyes vanishing away as if made of light.

Bladed eyes stared sharp. "Vhat d'ya vant, king of dee slaven?" the woman asked, holding her staff like a flag. At her side and taking her hand, stood a pretty girl, no older than Caelestis, scowling like a cat in a corner. *What do you want, king of the slaves*, she had said. He had to adjust his position to hear better, to understand better.

Aldemar had trouble translating the creole. He dismissed Ser Vall and his men and stepped down his destrier, dropping heavy,

like an anvil from a ship. He hung hammer and shield from the saddle's rings and came forth, steps heavy under a mild rain. Thick silver hair fell to his shoulders with a braid to his left side, close to his cerulean blue eyes. Aldemar was huge, a giant carved from moonstone, with a heavy braided beard, poorly groomed and as grey as his mane.

"What do *you* want, my lady of snow?" he asked. "It's you who've come, and you who seem in need."

"Dip-Vinter's yet ta come," the woman said. "As is yar Got. Vee vant Angevin-kasah, and then vee'll leave ya in lone und at peace. No more must daii." *Deep winter's yet to come as is your God. We want Castle Angevin. Then we will leave you alone and at peace. No more must die.*

Angevin was a God-made Relic, older than stars and the heritage of the Angevin clan, lesser cousins to the Valheim. What folly it was to plea for such a treasure. And still, she was right; Deep-winter was months to come and the Zodiac Black yet to end.

"I've the largest free people's armee in the planet," she said as the child clung to her with both hands. "Dis Zodiac Black vill be the end of ya, like it vas yar queen's." She offered a cruel grin. "Ya've come to deter me vith words, so I ask again, what d'ya vant?"

"A truce," Aldemar answered ignoring the mention of Amara and half understanding what she said. "God waits for the time of beginning. When she touches the World Engine, you'll die under my fires. For the woman you've offended, I've come to spare you."

"Der's no running for us," she said. "Ve've de comfort of knowing we're lost either way." Her eyes hopped from soldier to soldier. "Life in da Forest ist cruel as ya may never know. But ya've more to loos, slave, and yar men are week without luminas."

"We are weak without light?" he asked and scoffed.

She nodded, her grin sour, eyes sharpening.

“Is it food you want?” Aldemar asked, “and warmth? Land easier to sow? Lady Ankara, my spies have told me about you. You come from Skygarden. It took you what? Seven, perhaps nine years to traverse the Apsu? How weak and hungered are you after such cosmic journey? You don’t know the Forest of this planet like I. Take what I give and live.”

“No,” she answered. “Not enough. Ve vant Got to see us and be on our side. Her Relics under our control.”

“Then submit. Bow to me and God. 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. Do it and I’ll give you what you desire.”

“A Got-kasah?” she asked. “A place in her court?”

He shook his head. “Among her people. The Speakers will give you and yours the Foundational Baptism. Firebrands will be tattooed on your palms and you’ll be given a lord to follow and Relics to serve you. You’ll be Templar and part of God’s Imperium. I swear it.”

Lady Ankara refused and as Aldemar returned to Angevin he could not hide the joy of meeting her again in the field. The little cat by her side, the child girl, brought a private reverie to mind and he pursed lips trying not to think of his children. Shaking the feeling away he gave a final order. “To the River with them. Every soul.”

Months later, when the warriors of priestess Ankara reassembled for a final showdown, Aldemar Valheim 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. With the cavalry at each side, men 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 it would all be over.

It was at Skygarden's twelfth hour, not a moment sooner nor 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. For a hundred years and Sara's blessed life, the suns would be brighter and the days would be warmer.

Unhorsed, Aldemar Valheim had made his way through a thicket of warriors in search of the priestess. 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.

Dropping his weapons Aldemar stood surrounded by enemies, yet confident. Before they approached for a kill he took that hilt that hung from his belt, the Bastion of Valheim. Its circular pommel, silver grip and intricate rain-guard activated with the force of his élan and from its tip a thin line of light appeared, coiling down. The Bastion's spell-whip, arms of the Sil, had been summoned.

It was a long, winding and bright, metallic strip burning everything it touched. As it lay sprawled over the mud like a fiery serpent, puddles boiled and soil melted. He challenged the men with a tip of his head. Too afraid to engage, they halted and ran away.

Hours later, Aldemar found priestess Ankara kneeling, defeated, as the dawn of Sara's hundred-year reign broke in the horizon with a glistening dawn.

It was the year 3402 Anno Autem Trascendentium.

## Chapter 5 – 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 mountain and herding sheep for the northern 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 midsts 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 had been 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 skin 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, and then shot in the brain with the arrow of the Horse Lord, Aldemar Valheim. 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."

Already knowing this in his heart of hearts, for the memories had come once and again in waves of bitter chills, Van said: "where is Mariana?"

And mother answered: "there can only be one Erelim of Ormus. Only one may inherit the Realm."

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 Aldrich Ormus 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 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 northern 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 beyond, in that place where nothing lived and the eyes of God slept, 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 on 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."

But after Mariana, there was no force to keep him sane and he entered the Forest at will, seeking to survive it and see this place of nothing. And, as he stared at the Forest and heard it whispering his name, he thought of a journey through that place where only 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 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 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 Spirit-wolf; large as a freeman's house, its paws thick and heavy, making shallow pools of water where it walked. There was a trail of them that led to the creature's pack, a group 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.*

So his journey through the Forest and towards Summanus continued.

\*

Cloaked by trees and things that live, was an ancient Relic, a lonely temple abandoned and lost. Like Araboth and the God-made structures of 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 stone and steel over time.

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 and entered the temple. Within dark passages, a sparking noise and a beaming light called to him.

The Relic-temple was warm with God's light, and Van walked barefoot over dusty halls and corridors. 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 marble, warm and layered under his feet. Careless and unmoved by painless loss, he moved on.

When he reached the source of light he saw 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 tears of the Relic's decomposing body. Drops burned and flashed; sparks alerting the poor beast to hiss at one corner then another.

The forsaken 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. Certainly, he thought, its master's bones held some measure of Fire, and so the Ecko endured.

Van stared at the Relic-creature and then at the Armoria beneath it. It was a beauty, armoured plates 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, and he pulled his hand to safety. Sweat, exhaustion and fever felt cold in 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 structure, silencing the Forest. 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 slate. 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 surface. 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 place God would be unable to find him. But a painful death was unfitting and he could not die so close to the border, lest he be found. 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 in the distance. He walked back up the hill and into the valley, down the river and through the forest, up the ridge and down again until he stood once more under its black walls. It lay as he had last seen it, wet from the weeping clouds.

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.

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-armor.

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 plating 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.

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. 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. He placed his helmet on, the crest like a demon's mane, and a glass barrier appeared before his eyes connecting it to the breathing mask. 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 6 – 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 know 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 battle of Angevin-Ankara of 3401 was over and his father had returned.

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, marquees, earls, counts, viscounts, barons and exalted knights followed his father up the Seed-road, their capes and flags flying arrogantly to the winds with an expectation of Eisen courtesies and banquet.

Caelestis felt such joy on seeing them, 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 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 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 estranged to the world as her little hands and chubby fingers tried to grab the eerie flakes of white that fell over her cradle during the ceremony.

Following on his brother's example, Caelestis refused the honour to see Sara in her cradle, lowering his face in proud defiance to a crowd's desperate want. Their whispers and the Speaker's scowls did not deter him for, when the baby returned to Skygarden, his father would go with her. For that he refused her and even hated her.

Darien escaped the rite by hiding his face on a book and letting the world pass him by. Caelestis 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, and when his father gave them all a single kiss goodbye and marched on behind God's entourage, Caelestis made hands to fists and ran away, refusing his embrace and hating him for preferring God. Still, Aldemar would return to Araboth, confident of Adolf's Peace and leaving lady María Teresa to care for his children and the Council of Thirteen Maidens to rule the kingdom. He saw them gather, kneel and swear eternal allegiance, sealing his father's destiny in God's palace.

With the chapel to the brink 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 would not stay, he thought, neither would he. And so the engines roared the Interstellar ship to flight, with him in it.

"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 as 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 your body, you too will become like a star.”

“A star.”

“There’s only one darkness out there,” she had said, “yet there are many lights fighting it. What will you be, Cae? No... What will you choose to be?”

\*

Alone, in an unused and dusty room, thick glass the only barrier between him and outer space, the boy of seven stared enthralled at that dark place where life came from and yet where no one could live. He turned around pulling a cloak over his shoulders, the stars at his back, and closed his eyes. He fell into a deep sleep, in the midst of that region of the mind where dreams feel warm and true.

\*

*“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.

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

But he doubted.

*“This is not god,”* he heard the voice again, words as clear as if he was speaking them himself. *“Only your god and it must die.”*

Caelestis widened his gaze turning to the closed door to his 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, but fear and the jolting spasms of adrenaline kept him strong. He reached a grand doorway opened wide and filled with light. Inside he saw, lying on the floor, the bodies of Sara's Guardian Knights; men moaning over puddles of red. Some quivered in agony, blood sprouting from opened wounds.

Some lay still as stones.

Beyond them, a man in crimson robes 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.

Caelestis felt the heat and smell of men in death's trial and tasted the humid tang of blood in the air. Dead knights 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 gaping wound that had opened his chest like ripe fruit.

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, stars shimmering around. 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 slayer 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, when 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. He didn't have the strength the bow demanded to be drawn.

"Stop... him..." Aldemar begged once more, eyes closing with disappointment. "Please..."

When tension seemed gone from the assassin's face, when his eyes set on the baby with a sense of peaceful tranquility, the dagger above her like a fang, Caelestis lifted the bow, his mind empty of thought, pulled on the line and released.

The arrow struck the man on the left flank, breaking ribs and piercing tissue and lung. 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 strike, the man's hood moved away and their eyes met for a moment long enough to burn on him the grief of one enslaved to agony. Caelestis closed his eyes when the assassin's body burst to light. 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 did not 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 healer came but shook his head with sullen denial.

"Let him go," the man said. He was grey of beard and white of robes, already tainted with his father's blood. "He's gone."

The old man knelt by the kid's side, ready to offer his comfort but Caelestis would not have it. He took the man's cape and pressed his hands over the huge chest of his injured father, the cloth turning red as the boy watched breathing subside, gently.

"He's gone," the man promised.

"No!" Caelestis screamed, "no, you can't!" Blood gushed out as he lifted the cloth to see the size of the wound. "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 child 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. "Not you... father."

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

"Look."

Caelestis felt a heavy arm on his shoulder. He sat up staring at his father's chest, moving. He was breathing in and out, resting, sleeping.

“You must have closed the wound. 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 Valheim. God’s saviour, our Moshayim.”

\*

It was known that for each bloodline, noble or not, only one could be Erelim and for each family the chosen was its master. He would bear the glory, the spirit and the blessing of God. As a conduit of her power he alone would calm the Erelia or vanquish them. He would show Relics how to find balance. He would master the Unborn, teaching them who is kin and who is foe, and he would make the walls of the God-made, once rotting with abandon, heal, and grow.

“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 needed them. The man wore bandages over his injured chest and 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.

“Not quite. When men stop desiring, what the Speakers call dreaming, only then will God give us back our home. The Foundation makes sure this will be. To protect our fate, the Sil train and become the most powerful Fire users.”

“More powerful than a king?”

Seeing the boy’s joy Aldemar’s face turned as if bitten by a silent snake. “Cae,” 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 king, father. Like mother.”

“No, you won’t,” Aldemar said. “Our line is thick with the duty of Sil. You’re the Erelim of Valheim now and there’s a path you must follow.”

The man took the little pup in one hand, lifting it from the scruff and setting it unto the light of the hanging chandelier above. “This little creature, he has no choice but to be a beast.”

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

“You have no choice but to be more than a man,” he said kneeling by his side.

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 in our clan, 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, Cae, when an Erelim’s journey started and ended in the Foundation. When Erelim were Sil. But now... now they honour Adolf with marriage and bear children, like ordinary men.” He almost sounded disgusted. “Stand proud son, even then we Valheim kept to the Sein Kalei. Few clans do. Alas, you’ll find others like you, who were meant to rule and will instead serve.”

“Erelim are Sil,” Caelestis recited, knowing the words of Sein Kalei. “Sil are Erelim. As God intended.”

“As God intended,” the man’s voice came deep from his throat. “To wed no one and bear no children.” A bitter shadow moved under his eyes. “To be a dog and die like a dog, in service, loyalty and devotion.”

Caelestis stood confused. “But you married mother.”

“You will also marry,” Aldemar answered, turning away. “It’s Adolf’s law. But—”

“You didn’t want it?” Caelestis asked, sensing his father’s sad undertones. He placed the dog at his feet, escaping his father’s gaze. The man 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 lea—”

“I made that mistake,” Aldemar interrupted. “Drunk with what I thought was freedom. Listen well, Cae, the Foundation should go first and it will again, one day. You ought to prepare for that time, when the Archons return.”

The boy gulped. Like the halls of the castle the 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. His eyes were now on one of them.

“You’re too young to understand,” his father said solemnly. “The Sil should ever be at God’s side. They have no time for—”

“Family? Like you?” the boy said pulling on Titan’s chain, like one draws breath, and looking up at the man with angered eyes.

Aldemar lifted his chin. “It’s tradition that our family serves God as Guardians. Son, 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. I don’t—”

“Cae—”

“No! Mother said that—”

“You *will* be Sil!” the man roared. “You will, Caelestis Adolf. You hear? As was I and as all Erelim should. Do you

think your mother questioned my decision? Do you think she reproached me like you do now?"

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 said. "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 the man's gaze and forced a smile. "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 a sadness came over him.

The scribe wrote it down and Aldemar placed his seal over the wax. He sighed and sat on his heavy oaken chair. "I've chosen a good master for you," He said, turning beyond the window. "You'll be Silen to Erelim Sil, Cid de Merak."

"Not you?"

Aldemar shook his head, with feigned remorse. "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. He'll make you strong."

"Mommy said it's better to be kind than stron—"

"Your mother's dead," Aldemar whispered, sullen darkness over his eyes.

It was as much as if he had screamed it. Tears rushed to Caelestis' eyes, dropping heavily over his cheeks.

Aldemar shook his head, frustration clouding his stern countenance. “You’ll become strong Cae, for her. Won’t you?”

Caelestis dropped his gaze once more but lifted, near whimpering and feigning pride. “And you,” he said. “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.”

Aldemar looked at his son for only a moment before finding a tender smile to offer. “What will you brother—?”

“He’ll let me,” Caelestis promised. “He told me.”

“Of course,” Aldemar sighed. “Take Titan with you. Friends should stay together. Now come, we must see to your future.”

A powerful Relic, a lion Ecko, grey of fur and with glowing eyes, waited at the door, ready to escort them. It was a magnificent specimen, tall and proud, with a thick mane and sharp eyes, and it was mechanical. Like all Relics—a machine given life by the power of its master. Caelestis petted the Ecko and found in its blue eyes a softer gaze than his father’s. Titan pulled back, in fear of the Relic, eyes wide and growling. It made him laugh.

“Hello Kora,” he said. “Will you come with us?”

“With your father,” said the beast, in its echoing, metallic voice.

They walked through the streets of Eisentown and into a large wooden house by the shallow stream. A water wheel spun, spilling water over the wooden deck and a small canal. Behind it, the door was open and, inside, candlelight and the red of a furnace stayed the chilly breeze with a warm breath.

“We can make it fit,” Haggar Lem, the old blacksmith, said moments later as two men lifted a gambeson over a table. “It’s a good fit for the boy. Gambeson is light and protects the knees. Boys always forget the knees.”

“Fix it, Lem,” Aldemar said, “and have it delivered. And don’t...” he shook a hand, “don’t put the crest.”

“Yes, m’ lord,” Haggar Lem said with a low bow, apprentices and journeymen bowing even lower to their masters.

“Why not?” Caelestis asked once they stood outside under the mild rain. “Why not the crest, daddy?”

“I’m not your daddy,” the man exclaimed 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 would not be right.” He made a gesture, his alone; closing and opening of his eyes, as if to show patience.

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

“Quite. Beyond the stars of our sky.”

“Why is our kingdom so far from God?”

“Someone must protect the wayward planets. They have so little in them, but our presence alone pushes the Summanus back. When you’re old you’ll see. You will 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—”

Aldemar stopped and gave him a stare. “Count yourself lucky if your final act is that of giving life.” The man started off. “Kora,” he said and the lion responded with a bow. “Take Cae to town. The people wish to see him.” He walked fast leaving nothing but the noise of heavy boots on grime.

The Ecko stopped and bowed. “Yes, master,” it said with a deep voice, fitting for its regal form.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” Caelestis lamented.

“You mourn, little master,” the lion said.

“What’s mourn?” he asked.

“To grieve,” Kora dictated from within its records. “It is the expression of deep sorrow for someone who has died. To suffer what those who no longer can and for that gift that has been lost.”

Caelestis sighed as he turned to look at the road and the village ahead. He cared not for the word, only the solace of finding meaning, if only for such menial thing.

Walking down the main road he heard doors and windows open to the waking sun. His father had been adamant the smith received them before first light, but Caelestis had not realised why until then. At dawn men and women of Eisengraise performed the Baptism of the Sun. An entire kingdom woke, stepped out into the light, 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 its face 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 noises that shouldn’t be and a ruckus all too uncommon for the silent people of Eisentown.

When he opened his eyes they were looking at him.

“Saviour,” they whispered.

“Our lord saved her,” they said, owning to his deeds as if 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 them 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 people laugh.

“May you live a hundred years,” they said with every gift placed at his feet.

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

## Chapter 7 – 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. Orphaned, Solaria journeyed like a spiralling wonder in the midst of a universe too large and unknown, empty of light. It 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 Omnis, largest of Relics, adorned the world with their intricate parts. Made in the form of gods and creatures their bodies 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 merged with the mountain and the landscape.

Their smaller kin, the Luviana Relics, were of many sizes and made 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 made 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 veins 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.

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.

For it to mature, the crystal egg would have to grow. Already glassy appendages had taken root and spread, like a thick milky web, through the ground. 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 of the Luviana kind, took one additional step to stand between the man and the creature that slept within the malformed crystal.

But there was nothing to fear.

If anything, the place seemed 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, Cain."

The Messenger said nothing.

"The creature grows well," the wolf asserted. "Seven years to maturity, perhaps more."

“Tell them,” Cain said with his voice of thunderous wind. “Speak of the time of beginning.” The sleeping eyes of the embryo inside the glass twitched. “This should be the last cycle.”

The Ecko nodded and its eyes shimmered with the reflection of the beast inside its crystal shell.

—