

Red Hell's Retribution

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PART ONE: METAMORPHOSIS

Invocation

Sing to me, O Muses of the crimson deep, the tale of the man who,
having once been the reluctant king of a city of righteous citizens,
was reduced to ragged scraps for his vicious upbringing
and perennial atrocities against his people.

Sing to me of the man who,
having inherited a mind diseased, the perpetual stain on his lineage,
spurned all counsel in his anxiety and arrogance
and irrevocably incurred the wrath of our pantheon,
both sacred and profane.

Hear my summons, furies of the red depths,
you brooding butchers of the damned,
and sing to me from your homes of flesh and bone,
of a fate never before imputed upon a mortal creature
that was yet reserved for this erring ruler.

Sing to me of the terrible methods
by which the divine would seize a man
and destroy his mind and body.

Vteskelr, the Red Prophet

I. The Herald of the Black Haze

As he trudged up the stone stairwell, King Sulymeigh's thoughts were heavy with despair. Alone and without his vassals' gaze on him, he stopped for a moment and closed his eyes, brow furrowed and posture slack. Several seconds passed before he forced his eyes open and resumed his ascent, holding himself with his usual air of stateliness. A king of Wry Dragael could afford no appearance of weakness, even in these hopeless circumstances.

As he ascended the spiral staircase, Sulymeigh gazed out of the windows in the curving walls to glimpse a panorama of his kingdom. To the north lay the regal gardens and the deep woods beyond them, the cultivated flowers and hedges contrasting the wildness of the trees and vast undergrowth. Autumn had tinged the forest canopy with the first of its warm hues, filling the king with its bittersweet melancholy; some of his fondest childhood memories lingered in the last bits of green that were now becoming the blazing oranges and reds of the coming season. He told himself he would cherish these memories one last time if no one would survive to see the spring.

A dozen more paces into his ascent, the windows bore the king a view of the Solemn Sea to the southeast. Gazing past the edge of the Cliffs of Wrath, he beheld the great sea spewing its salty spray upon the foot of the precipices, a watery grave for the kingdom's traitors. His eyes followed the wicked descent from the cliffs to the jagged shore below and his gaze came to rest on the dark rocks that skewered sinners upon impact. But, for all the death that was borne on the cliffs, the Solemn Sea offered hope of survival. Rumors had winged their way to the king's ear from the lands across the wide sea, and with few options left, Sulymeigh placed his absolute

confidence in them. He expected his far-sailing envoys to return with some semblance of good news, but nothing was certain.

Whatever brief sense of hope he held was now chased away by restless trepidation. His pace quickened.

He turned his nerve-wracked eyes to a west-facing window and stared, full of dread, past the houses and markets of the shabby village below, over the stone walls of the front gate that stood guard above urban commute, and across the green fields to the open, cloudless horizon. This view marked the imminent presence that now sat, unseen, at the foot of his kingdom, its gradual invasion advancing little by little with every passing day.

Sulymeigh's fists and jaw clenched involuntarily as he stood alone in the stone stairwell. He tore his gaze away, exhaled, and relaxed his hands and jaw. He closed his eyes for a moment and ran his fingers through his dark hair, then continued to trudge upwards, his pace echoing in the stairwell. Never before had his steps felt so heavy and the stone walls so narrow.

Sulymeigh reached the top of the stairs and was met with an old wooden door. He grasped the iron handle and pushed through, entering a regal sunlit hall adorned with stained glass windows and blue tapestries. At the long dark table in the middle of the room sat his council, a small congregation of three individuals. In the first seat to Sulymeigh's right was an older man with short grey hair and white robes. A pallid staff leaned against the armrest of his chair, which held up his thin robed arms and bony hands. Around his neck hung several amulets of various symbols, pendants of copper and cord. In the first seat to Sulymeigh's left was a fair-haired woman in silky silver robes. Her plait was adorned with a shining platinum pin and a thin diamond necklace hung down to the top of her sternum. One seat down from her was a man with a dark brown beard whose brass armor, though smooth and polished, bore a number of

sizable scratches and dents. They all stood upon his arrival, the older man rising last, and bowed low.

“Spare me the decorum.” Sulymeigh seated himself. “We have grave matters to attend to.”

They sat down somewhat uneasily and remained silent, waiting for the king to speak. But he did not propose any matters nor open the floor to the council. Stewing in his anxiety, he struggled to find his words as he sat in his oak chair, nervous with the weight of his council’s expectant gazes. With all eyes fixed on him, he stared down at the table with a hand on his chin, immense pressure mounting in his mind.

Several moments passed in heavy silence.

“Where’s Agritha?” The bearded man ventured a few plain words.

“I – I found no need for our Master of Coin to be present for this meeting,” Sulymeigh managed. “Firstly, the matter we will discuss today has no bearing on the finances of the kingdom. We are here to further goals of more import than filling our bank vaults.”

Easing into eloquence, he leaned back in his chair with a stony expression on his face.

“Secondly, we are all aware of Agritha’s propensity for gossip, which would only prove problematic in this dire climate. Thus, what is to be deliberated in this room shall not leave it.

The discussion among us here today is to rest with us and only with us.”

The dark-haired king paused for a moment.

“Wrendor, you may relate our knowledge of the situation to Dun-Branson and Cweneira.”

“Your Highness,” said silver-robed Cweneira, “even in times of crisis, propriety would see High Cleric Wrendor be addressed in his full title.”

“Cwen,” Sulymeigh said, irritated, “you must recall that I suspended decorum from the start. As I was saying, Wrendor, enlighten them.”

“Surely, my lord,” said Wrendor. “Now listen closely. What I am about to impart to you will seem strange, for the thing that waits at the foot of our great kingdom has no mention in our sacred transcripts, nor in any histories or bestiaries native to our continent. I’ve had to scour the arcane mythologies of the Eastern peoples, and my scholars and I have only had mild success in translating their texts. Much remains nebulous to us; for example, there is no consensus on any epithets or nomenclature of this thing we face. The Salimids call it the Plague or the Scourge, the Gerynians call it the Visitor, but the Aejuí have the most descriptive moniker for it: the Black Haze.”

Dun-Branson leaned forward and Cweneira crossed her arms.

“We know,” continued Wrendor, “that it has been among the Easterners for time immemorial and its domain stretches from the Pale Sands to the Mountains of Geryn at the edge of the world. We have also extrapolated, with tentative certainty, that it sweeps through the Eastern lands at regular intervals, coming once or twice every few hundred years to one or two cities at a time. What we don’t know is what it is exactly; conflicting descriptions of it abound, probably because of the abysmal survival rate. The Salimids and Aejuí portray it as a dark cloud that comes in like a storm, bringing death as it rolls through the cities, and oddly enough, they portray it as some kind of cleansing phenomenon and even welcome it to some degree. It does appear to be a plague of sorts as the Salimid accounts suggest, but their poetic writing style lacks a concrete description. The Aejuí provide the most illustrative description of it, saying that it tends to embody all that strikes immediate fear in the hearts of men, that it takes the form of reptile, insect and distorted human anatomy. We’ve speculated that combining these two sorts of

accounts can give us a more definitive answer. Perhaps it is a scourge of snakes, or locusts, or hideous pox? The Gerynians do seem to portray it as a single entity, however...

“At any rate we can be certain of one thing: whatever it is, it’s coming. Imminently. And based on the accounts of the Easterners, if it were to roll across the continent and extend into our borders, I am uncertain that the kingdom would survive.”

With wide eyes and furrowed brow, Dun-Branson and Cweneira were visions of distress. Sulymeigh’s jaw was clenched again.

There was another brief silence, broken once again by Dun-Branson. “How do we know it’s here on the continent? Where is it exactly?”

“Again, we lack full knowledge,” said Sulymeigh. “We’ve heard that kingdoms as close as Rockwell have been afflicted by the scourge. Our scouts should be returning soon to give us report.”

Cweneira interjected. “Wrendor, what gives you doubt of the kingdom’s survival? From the mere fact that accounts of the scourge exist, it can’t be so deadly that the Eastern nations have not weathered the calamity several times over. Has the augury of the birds borne you ill portent?”

“It has, my queen. All manner of songbird and raptor have deserted us, leaving us only the scavengers and corvids. The augury has produced a ruffled black crow.”

Distress seized Cweneira. “How long ago was this?”

“Just ten days ago, my queen.”

“Give us another augury then, and pray that our fortune has changed! Motherly Matra cannot have abandoned us.”

Wrendor nodded. He rose from his seat, walked over to a closet in the corner of the long hall, opened it, and produced an ornate wooden perch from within. A meter and half tall was the bird's landing that sat atop a long pole, sporting various runes carved into the smooth wood and a wide polished base at the foot. After carrying it to a window in the northern wall, the fateful roost stood exposed to the streaming sunlight while Wrendor returned to the closet. Filling his arms with its contents, he soon returned to the table with a variety of odd objects: an iron grail, a pen of rose quartz, and a small nugget of gold. He placed these effects on the table. "Our gold stores run thin," he noted, taking the nugget and dropping it into the steel cup. The cleric removed a copper talisman from around his neck, tied it to his white staff and struck the ground with the bottom. The talisman of Haulyd the Dawnbringer, the benign sun god who warms the Earth, rebounded off the staff in its short tether and rang out with the clamor of a chapel bell. The tip of the rod began to smolder white-hot like the coals of a forge, and when Wrendor touched it to the shining nugget in the chalice, dark smoke plumed up with a searing hiss. As he held the blazing tip to the nugget, the gold liquified and pooled within the iron grail, and once it had completely melted, the cleric brought the grail and the pen over to the perch. Dipping the crystal stylus in the liquid gold, he traced the runes on the perch's pole, the wood soaking up the gleaming ink as the pen ran across it. Now clutching the imbued shaft with both hands, Wrendor bowed his head, closed his eyes, and whispered words of omen-bringing in a solemn ritual.

The High Cleric backed away from the augury's roost and the breeze wafting in through the window ceased. All activity froze in anticipation of an avian portent. The latent air stood still and the clouds came to a halt in their lofty course. The trees ceased their swaying and their rustling leaves quieted. Even the chattering of the birds and squirrels gave way to silence.

The council waited with bated breath.

From the window, their sign appeared far away, a small speck on the horizon. Flying closer, black wings steadily came within the eye's blurry discernment. Cweneira exhaled and dropped her head.

"The bane of our hope has come once again," she said. "Matra could not stave off the animosity of her celestial peers."

Dun-Branson remained steadfast. "And what of it? We are in no better or worse position than we were before. Have we not been visited by dark corvids in the past, and are we not still standing? This is nothing we haven't seen before and we shall weather it once again."

They all turned their gaze back to the window as the crow grew nearer. Then, still outside the eye's detailed discernment, a second black object flew into view and intercepted the corvid in the air. Maintaining a trajectory towards the augury roost, the two dark creatures fought mid-flight in a frenzied tangle as they approached. They careened through the window and past the perch, landing on the long table of the council room and skidding to a halt between the four noblemen.

The sight that met their eyes was one of pure, swift terror. Sharp gasps all around, the council threw themselves away from the image of horror that had flown in before them, for the crow lay dead, its eyes lifeless, its neck bloody and gaping from where dark pincers had torn out its throat. Gnawing on the bird's raw vocal cords, the black tarantula fluttered its wooly moth wings as it stood over the supine crow, its abdomen as large and round as a man's skull. Twenty-four long, furry legs curled down from its dark thorax and gripped the dead crow, clinging to its prey with a vise that resembled a human rib cage. Its pincers, caked in crimson blood, matched the red script carved into its bulging abdomen, and twelve furious eyes glowed electric green in its head.

As the noblemen gazed stricken with fear, the arachnid continued its macabre feast. It turned the crow's feathery head over with its two front legs and sank its pincers into the bird's eyes, devouring them whole, before ripping out its feathers and swallowing them in turn. The spider then crushed the beak in its gangly grip, guzzled down the two halves, and cracked open the smooth skull to consume its brain with a sickening slurp.

The giant arachnid turned to Dun-Branson in its wild, violent hunger. He gave out a horrified gasp as it lunged at him with wings furiously abuzz, and he instinctively swung his arms in front of him, deflecting the giant tarantula off his bronze gauntlet. As the spider landed on the table, Dun-Branson recovered his battle-hardened composure, unsheathed the dagger at his hip and plunged it into the creature's head as it recoiled to leap, piercing through its vivid eyes and transfixing it to the wooden table. Bright green blood gushed out like a popping pustule and the creature emitted an unholy shriek as its legs gripped the tabletop in agony.

After contorting in place in a frenzy of spasms, the winged arachnid collapsed motionless, its blood running off the table and dripping onto the floor. Dun-Branson breathed heavily, his eyes wide, his gaze fixed on the creature. He pulled on the dagger hard and the tarantula twitched as he wrenched the blade from its cranium. His grip relaxing, the weapon fell to the floor as he stumbled back into his chair, his eyes never leaving the dead creature on the table.

The other three noblemen stared at this horrific scene in stunned silence, their mouths agape.

“What in Red Hell...” Cweneira said in a low utterance.

Wrendor replied in a grave voice. “I fear you are very apt to say it, my queen. Neither White nor Blue nor Black Hell could have conceived this thing. The runes on its body can only be written in the blood of those damned to Red Hell.”

The High Cleric inched forward, his staff raised defensively, and leaned over the creature to inspect its red scrawlings.

“A message from the red denizens,” he declared with clear notes of dread in his voice. “Or rather a partial one: ‘It is not enough for you to die...’”

Silence fell over them as they contemplated these fateful words.

“Well, whom does it address?” Sulymeigh’s voice was desperation. “Is it for an individual or for all four of us? And do we now know that this is what we are to face, a plague of these ungodly creatures?”

“I know not,” replied Wrendor. “I can only hope that the Easterners have been addressed like this before. After this meeting, I’ll have my apprentices collect the spidery specimen to see if we can find something like it in the texts of the Easterners. Only then may we have an answer.”

Cweneira spoke next. “And I’ll take up prayer immediately. If our threat truly is supernatural, then beseeching motherly Matra may be one of the few effective courses we have left. My king, have you received any word about the excursion for the talisman of Matra the Omnipotent?”

“No,” replied Sulymeigh as he tore his gaze away from the black creature. “There has been no word from across the Solemn Sea. Nor should we trust holy artifacts from this point on. Our previous guesswork before should be forgotten; we must adopt a new course of action.”

An eerie silence fell on them as Sulymeigh contemplated a new plan, and the noblemen turned their nerve-wracked eyes back to the spidery herald. With its twelve eyes dark and

lifeless, its sickly verdant blood had begun to dry and settle into the cracks in the wood, emitting an unholy odor.

“The presence of Red Hell lingers in our kingdom through its various sycophants and rituals,” said Sulymeigh. “Where they have been tolerated in ages past, they shall be no more. We must rid the kingdom of all signs of this Hell and thus quash its influence over us. Dun-Branson, collect your soldiers and comb the city for anyone who remotely observes the practices of the Red Kin or harbors their icons. I give you full authority to destroy any and all guises of Red Hell’s iconography and to imprison the Kin to prepare for execution.”

“As you wish, my lord,” Dun-Branson responded. “I cannot think of a more noble assignment than to extinguish this evil myself.”

Cweneira spoke out. “Sully, this plan is misguided! If we were to round up and slaughter acolytes under any religious banner, we risk provoking the benign gods and spurning our last divine allies. Even the Red Kin are used as agents by the merciful deities to effectuate their will. Would you expect a tree to bear you fruit after you’ve pruned its branches?”

“Enough!” Sulymeigh roared. “I can’t stand your complacency! You would place hope in appeasing the very gods that may have designed our destruction! Are you so blinded by your priestly office to think that celestial minds are not bent on our ruin, even as a sign of their contempt is lying dead before us?”

“My lord, we must consider all – ”

“The time for consideration is over! We must act immediately. Or have you forgotten our days are numbered?”

Sulymeigh stood up and pushed in his chair.

“This meeting is over! Make no more delay, you all have your assignments.”

Cweneira stood speechless. Dun-Branson and Wrendor exuded visible unease, but after a moment they stood up, bowed low and left the room. As the fair-haired queen rose from her seat, Sulymeigh turned on his heel and departed in turn, leaving her behind in the council hall.

Irritated, Cweneira strode across the room and exited as well, slamming the door behind her.

She caught up to the king in the high-ceilinged great hall at the bottom of the stairwell and placed a hand on his arm to draw his attention. He stopped in his tracks as she circled his profile to face him, and making sure no one else was present, she addressed him sternly.

“Look at me and hear me well. There is nothing that divides people more than the stress of fear, and we are all properly afraid right now. This may be the time to act but it is not the time to cast aside your advisors, much less your holy Vicar. Do you understand me?”

Sulymeigh met her gaze with a look of severe disdain. “Don’t you ever defy me amidst my advisors again. Ever. Were you not Matra’s Vicar, I would lay violent hands on you, woman, and you would be sorry for it. Should you dare call my judgment misguided once more in the council hall, you shall never set foot in it again.”

The king then trode off across the great hall, leaving the queen to seethe in frustration. He opened the door to his private chambers at the far end, entered, and locked it behind him.

Cweneira closed her eyes. Silently beseeching Matra to grant her patience and equanimity, she quashed her livid anger and regained mental composure. The queen and holy Vicar strode over to the eastern wall of the great hall and entered a tall stairwell leading up to the next floor. The top step brought her to a long hallway with several doorways. She proceeded down to the end and went through the last door on the left.

Cweneira entered a bedchamber glowing with the hazy sunset that streamed in through two open windows. The fair-haired queen saw her infant daughter and five-year old son sitting

on the stone floor playing with tan burlap dolls while a housemaid sat in a wicker chair next to the hearth. Between working on her embroidery and keeping an attentive eye on the children, she had evidently helped the children give the dolls eyes by sewing two copper buttons onto each of them; there was a small pile of the buttons nearby.

The boy looked up at Cweneira. “Hi, Mommy. What happened at the meeting? Did dad order people around?”

Cweneira smiled and knelt down to embrace her children.

“Yes,” she answered, “dad gave his orders as kings must in order to do what’s best for the kingdom. Remember that, Lewyn. A good king always tells people what to do for good reasons.”

“I know. I can’t wait to be king one day and tell people what to do. It’ll be so much fun.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself now. It looks like you’re having plenty of fun with your dolls. What happened to that one?”

Among the four tan dolls lying on the floor, she pointed to a fifth that had been thoroughly blackened with soot.

“He wanted to play in the fireplace and got really dirty. Don’t worry, there wasn’t a fire going. Now he’s going to fight the other ones. Look! This one is Sir Dun-Branson and he’s leading these three other soldiers to fight the dirty old black one.”

Lewyn held up the Dun-Branson doll as his little sister picked up the black one. Her hands were covered in soot.

Lewyn continued. “Caerlyn really likes the black doll, she plays with it whenever I’m not using it.”

The housemaid rose from her chair. “Beg your forgiveness, my queen. I’ll clean her up.”

“No need,” replied the queen. “I don’t mind doing it myself. You may take your leave now. The hour is getting late and I’m sure the children required much of you.”

“Your compassion is boundless, my queen. I’ve left you tea and honey on the nightstand as always.”

The housemaid left the bedchamber. Cweneira then grabbed a cleaning rag from the other side of the room and turned to where the children were sitting. Caerlyn had somehow gotten ahold of the small honey jar on the nightstand; her stubby fingers were covered in the sticky substance.

“Oh no, Caerlyn! You’re making even more of a mess – ”

The queen stopped short. Her infant daughter had picked up some of the oldest copper buttons, colored green from oxidation, and stuck them to the face of the black doll with her honey-coated fingers. She held up the dark figurine for her mother to see an impression of twelve green eyes.

Cweneira clasped her hands over her mouth and stood rooted to her spot. Lewyn then spoke, his words filling his mother with dizzying dread.

“Now the messenger can always be watching! He can see everything.”

Cweneira became pure distress. “What did you just say?”

The room dimmed precipitously. Cweneira’s heart filled with panic as the light of the sunset grew fainter. She ran over to the window and gazed out upon the open sky.

Off in the distance, the horizon was lined with inky Black Haze.

II. The Song of the Oculus

“I find myself hateful, Wrendor. So hateful.” Sulymeigh and the High Cleric sat alone on an oak bench in the regal gardens. The late afternoon sun shone through the white wisps of clouds painting the sky. No wind breezed by to stir the flowers in their beds nor the vines on the grey statues. Wry Dragael was still and sullen.

“I hate the people and my inheritance of their yoke. When my father fell in dread combat and left me the kingship, I resolved to rule fairly and kindly, to show love and mercy to our people because I wanted to be nothing like my father. He was always quick to wield violence and humiliation against those he deemed unruly, even his only son, and he had the audacity to call it discipline. But we all knew better; that sick bastard just needed ventilation. So I vowed to be a different type of sovereign, one that the people could learn to love instead of fear, because I was bereft of love and raised in fear. How naïve I was. How naïve to think the people merely hated my lord father himself. These creatures, Wrendor, they hate anyone who lords over them. Every olive branch I extended was too meager, every edifice I built for them was too shabby, every fair judgment passed upon their unruly peers was met with protest. So I grew hateful myself. You were there to witness my breaking point with these people, you saw me reviving my father’s policies out of pure necessity. Understand the anguish, Wrendor, of embodying the ugly, unlovable traits under which you and many others have suffered, of realizing that you’ve become like your father in every way that you hate. How could you not come to hate yourself?”

“So I am unbearably hateful, and I have turned that hate to those around me. Without the immediate stress of the council hall...the guilt, Wrendor - her intentions were pure and her words were temperate. She did not deserve my anger. She should not have felt the sting of my anger, but I lost myself in the anxiety. And before you say it, I understand this new calamity we face is

unprecedented, and people can act indecently under this kind of pressure. But the effect is all the same. I alienated myself from Cwen's good favor and disrespected her in her priestly title.

"Moreover, I hate that my regal office has alienated me from my children. Even the most lowly and powerless man can take comfort in his capacity as a parent. So why is it that the most powerful man in Wry Dragael finds himself denied this satisfaction? Of course, I have seen them grow and thrive within the walls of our castle, but I've hardly had a hand in their pedagogy, nor have I had time to talk to them outside of banquet and ceremony. And since these formal events have fallen away to prioritize our crisis, my time with them dwindles as the dark threat rises. This is pain too, Wrendor, that as disaster draws nearer, I can only watch my children grow without me and despite me. I see them live and prosper without any help from their father. I am unnecessary, and...and if I'm anything like my father, then they're better off without me.

"So not only do I harbor hate for my office, but I've become so utterly and incurably alone in this affair, this untameable disaster that I must tame, and I carry no comfort with me throughout it, Wrendor. The crown is too far too heavy for it."

Sulymeigh wore a furrowed brow, his gaze downcast. Wrendor sat next to him sullenly, then spoke.

"I think it's fair to say no one has been able to avoid hardship in these trying times, but I do not deny that you suffer unlike any other. At the same time, you feel the cold loneliness of White Hell in its vast arctic tundras along with the heavy gloom of Blue Hell with its unending river of grief and misery. But because you are so afflicted, you are wise in seeking me and confiding in me as a cleric. Sympathy is indeed one of my trades, but believe me when I say that none of your suffering is your own fault. You have been thrust into an onerous position of kingship for which you had no lasting ambitions, and you expect yourself to act nobly under

unprecedented pressure despite your lifelong anxiety. It is understandable that one would be sad and resentful in these circumstances, and it only speaks to your good character that you feel remorse when you hurt your wife and sorrow when you're separated from your children. My king, you are a good person."

Sulymeigh looked up at Wrendor.

"Then why must I suffer like this?"

Dun-Branson entered the garden from its southward walkway, his bronze armor resounding with every step. He rushed over to the king and cleric.

"My lord," said Dun-Branson, "My men and I have gathered the Red Kin and just now assembled them at the edge of the cliffs."

"Good," said Sulymeigh. His vulnerable tone became one of command in an instance. "Now let us attend to them."

The king rose and exited the gardens through the southern walkway with the robed cleric and armor-clad general following. Under the sky of early evening, Sulymeigh led them across a short intermediate lawn between the gardens and the castle and came to a large chapel abutting the palace's northern wall. Two armored sentries stood guard on either side of the chapel's entrance, a pair of tall wooden doors etched with twin images of feminine hands, both with index and middle finger extended, one hand pointing up and the other down. As the king and his company approached, the guards pushed the doors open.

The interior was an image of radiant pallor. Hewn from the stony ore of the Westpeak mountains, the white marble walls glistened with polish and the floor meandered throughout in a checkered pattern, white and grey granite inlaid in diamond shapes. The royal blue carpeting of the entrance led to a vast room of worship with no seats or benches; only four white marble

columns left and right of the center interrupted the open view. Stretching from floor to ceiling in a position of immediate notice was a marble statue of Matra, her pose stately and graceful. She stands tall and regal with one arm hanging low and the other raised upwards, both hands open, for she is the celestial interlocutor between men and their lofty gods. She alone can reach down to Earth to collect our humble prayers and offerings, and she alone metes them out to the ears of the lordly deities. Her gossamer garments ripple with the wind and her hair is the bright, warm hues of the dawn; an image of beauty so wild and free, just as she freely traverses the plains between the human and the divine. No other god is her equal either in majesty or virtue, for she is the queen of the deities and the advocate of mankind who continually chooses to show compassion to the people of Earth. And as it is only possible to the divine feminine, she is the pure embodiment of love and mercy.

Kneeling at the foot of this godly statute was Matra's Vicar, the queenly Cweneira. As befit her sacred title, she was absorbed in humble prayer, beseeching the supreme Goddess with unwavering vigilance. Cweneira heard the tall doors close behind them, and with her supplications interrupted, she rose from her prayerful position as they strode towards her. She walked over and met them between the first two pillars.

"The Kin are gathered at the cliffs," she stated plainly.

"Correct," the king replied.

"I have no desire to witness the slaughter, but you already know that much. You have a reason for me to be present for it, then."

"Right again. Your perspicacity remains sharp." He had hoped her demeanor would soften but his compliment was wasted on her. "This is not only an execution but also an interrogation. We will probe the Red Kin for information about the impending threat. And being

a supernatural threat, it would behoove us to have you present to make sense of what they relate. Your connection with the gods is intimate and your input is very valuable in these matters.”

“Is it now?”

A grave pause before Cweneira continued.

“I’m not going to explain to you how I feel when I’m deemed valuable one moment and not the next. But nonetheless, your reasoning is sound so I will accompany you to the Cliffs.”

The fair-haired queen wore an austere expression as she joined the king’s entourage. Sulymeigh stared daggers at her before turning to face an exiting door in the left wall of the chapel. Wrendor and Dun-Branson hid their unease as they followed the royal couple through the exit and into the castle. They traversed the short hallway there and entered the high-ceilinged great hall with its modest decoration, and they too passed through this room to enter the regal entrance hall.

Partway in their passage of the wide hallway, Sulymeigh ventured a few words with queen.

“How are the kids doing?”

As soon as the last word left his lips, Cweneira recalled the horrible likeness of the messenger her children had made. She suppressed a shudder.

“They are doing well, I think. Lewyn is as talkative and enthusiastic as ever. And Caerlyn has started to show bouts of...creativity.”

Cweneira looked up at the dark-haired king. Although he wore his usual hardened expression, clear notes of sorrow etched his face, just as, when a doleful grey cloud looms overhead and loosens its droplets, the lonesome face of a mountain bears the first streaks of rain. Looking up at him, she saw a man trying to remain resolute and leaderly while suffering the first

slings of the coming onslaught, a man made lonely and comfortless. Cweneira felt great pity and empathy for him as Matra filled her with soulful compassion, and all animosity she bore for him fled her heart.

“Lewyn admires you, Sully. He always tells me how he wants to be just like you, to rule as a good king and be loved by the people.”

“You told him I’m a good king?”

“There was no need. He assumed as much.”

A hint of a soft smile came to his face.

“Well, strange as it is to say, it may be for the best that we maintain his ignorance. Maybe if I hadn’t known about my father’s treatment of our people, I wouldn’t have thought to treat them similarly. Ignorance may have its usefulness at times. But I digress. I only mean to say that perhaps I should be envious of my son’s upbringing. So thank you, Cwen, for giving them a childhood I wish I had.”

Sulymeigh put his arm around his queen and leaned his head against hers. She matched his smile and allowed herself to enjoy the moment.

They reached the end of the sunlit entrance hall where two guards pushed open the tall doors. Sulymeigh and Cweneira stepped outside into the open air followed by Wrendor and Dun-Branson, continuing onwards under a hazy sunset sky. They turned left down a stone road that led them to the southern wall of the castle grounds, and there they passed through a tall archway in the wall to proceed onto the grassy fields atop the Cliffs of Wrath.

They were met with a long line of soldiers that blocked their view of the cliffs’ edge. Spear in the hand and sword at the hip, the soldiers stood erect in gleaming iron armor that bore the blue and white crest of Wry Dragael on the pauldron, and upon the royal company’s

approach, the soldiers parted in the middle to make an opening for the king and his council, allowing them to see the band of cultists amassed at the edge of the rocky precipices. About three hundred of them in total, many wore shabby red garments and bore several cuts and scars, while others wore the plain clothes of the kingdom's peasantry. The dread of death was writ on very few faces; most wore stoic expressions, carrying themselves with an eerie sense of calm.

Despite being confronted by mild expressions, Sulymeigh felt their gazes burrowing into him. All eyes were fixed on him again and a rush of adrenaline coursed through his body, causing him to shudder. Forcing himself to keep composure under the weight of their attention, Sulymeigh strode forward, making sure to remain in the proximity of his guard. He then addressed the mass.

“Elect a speaker from among you and let them come forth.”

Without conferring among themselves, a woman with wild black hair stepped forward from the crowd, ushering with her what appeared to be a skinny androgynous youth wearing a dark blindfold over hollow eye sockets. Hunched over, it clung to the wench's arm as she led it forward, both of them wearing plain, dark crimson robes. Three horizontal scars were etched into the thing's face, one on its forehead and one on both cheeks, forming a bizarre triangular symmetry across its face.

They presented themselves before King Sulymeigh, and without taking his eyes off the acolytes in front of him, the king turned his head and whispered his anger and anxiety to Dun-Branson.

“How was it never brought to my attention that a young Oculus and its Vicar were in my kingdom?”

“I am just as surprised as you are, my lord,” Dun-Branson rapidly replied. “I suppose my men aren’t well-versed in the hierarchy of the Red Kin. They must not have thought to mention this pair.”

The Oculus opened its mouth and let out a slack-jawed moan. Its pointed teeth glistened with the hazy light of the sunset before it snapped its maw shut, causing dark blood to spurt forth and run down its chin.

“It is impatient,” said the dark Vicar. “What do you want?”

Beckoning Cweneira to accompany him, Sulymeigh stepped forward with the Vicar of Matra and approached the Oculus with its frizzy-haired mouthpiece. About half a dozen paces away from the preeminent cultists, Sulymeigh spoke to the Vicar of the Oculus.

“I request an assurance that this thing,” he said pointing to the boy, “will not behave aggressively.”

“It is given,” she said. “Rest assured that violence was never contemplated by either of us. Our kind is more civil than commonly thought.”

“Then your supposed civility remains to be seen. What we have seen, however, is the dark haze in the west that grows closer every day. We know you have knowledge of it, specialized knowledge only held by the members of your religion. What say you?”

The Oculus remained still as it clung to its Vicar’s arm.

“We only know,” replied the dark Vicar, “that it marks the Advent of Red Hell and all the denizens within, the dark creatures with whom we vigilantly commune. The true plans of Red Hell will never be fully imparted to us but we have learned to trust them nevertheless, and in trusting them wholly we have seen reward.”

“Why should I believe you? How do I know you’re not feigning ignorance?”

“I don’t expect you to believe me because it wouldn’t serve you to stop your interrogation here. And I understand that completely. Every person that breathes the air of this earth deserves to put his or her own interests first in all matters. That is why the two of us now offer to advise you throughout the imminent Advent on the condition that you spare our lives and allow us to bear witness until the very end. I say just the two of us fully aware that you believe we herald the arrival of the Black Haze to your kingdom, and that your conviction in killing the multitude of us would be immune to any of our supplications. We don’t seek to have the rest of our kind spared in this offer; instead, you will satisfy your thirst for our blood and receive our advice as events unfold. The Oculus and I will be ensured not only these events, but also our lives lest you kill us and lose your source of arcana. If you don’t believe us at face value, then believe in our zeal to witness what is to come.”

Sulymeigh paused. “It seems...unwise to negotiate with those who would sacrifice their own kind.”

“Sacrifice?” She paused in turn. “Do you fear death, Sulymeigh? Do you fear it like any other man? It is only natural for a person to fear death because a natural person is not given knowledge of what lies beyond. Fear of death stems from the one of the greatest fears underlying the human mind, and that is fear of the unknown. Now look at the mass of people behind us. They know that their death is imminent, but how many of them look afraid? The only ones that have any trace of terror on their faces are the ones that we both know aren’t members of the Red Kin. They are Easterners: visiting Salimids, Aejui and Gerynians that you have plucked from among the common folk to have them killed with the rest of us. Your prejudice is well-known, my king, and here it is well-demonstrated.

Livid shock came over Cweneira and she looked up at the king, hoping to find some sign that the allegation was false. But the king showed no trace of denial as he avoided her gaze, and her shock became mixed with utter scorn.

The dark Vicar continued. “But to your credit, you undoubtedly estimated that their presence draws in the Black Haze as well, knowing full well that the Haze is their perpetual affliction. At any rate, it is only these people that are afraid to die. All those in red garb are calm in the face of death because we know what will happen upon our corporal demise: we will descend to our hell and eternally commune with the creatures to which we have made spiritual alliance. The Red Kin do not abhor the prospect of dying because death does not present any unknowns to us, but rather guarantees our greatest desire. Consider the offer with this in mind.”

She stepped back, leading the Oculus away to allow the king and queen to confer. Sulymeigh turned to Cweneira.

“Well, I see no downside to this deal. Everyone’s interests are furthered if no one becomes hostile to one another. We’ll throw them in the dungeon for good measure as well. What do you think?”

“When did you start caring about what I think?” barked Cweneira. “You knew I would disapprove of killing foreigners in our kingdom and yet you resolved to do it behind my back! You knew the risk of this venture and then you made it even worse! As if slaughtering the Red Kin wasn’t horrible enough!”

“Look, Cwen, you heard the Vicar just as I did. Even the Kin don’t value their own lives. As for the Easterners, they probably attract the Haze as much as the Kin. Imagine if we could prevent the coming disaster from ever happening! If we want to do what’s best for the kingdom, we must do away with all those whose presence beckons the Advent.”

“Do you think it’s best to strain our alliance with Matra? Her divine love extends to the Easterners just as much to you or me. Why do you insist on killing her children in droves?”

“There are more gods to consider than just Matra! There must be at least some deities that hate the foreigners, for who else would set the Haze on them? Did you not have concern in the last council meeting for appeasing the various gods?”

“So you would seek the favor of a few benign gods and cost us the good graces of Motherly Matra, our First Aegis? Would a logger ever think to tear down his wooden house in a blizzard to build a fire?”

This time, Cweneira’s title did not save her from his wrath. The king raised his hand and struck her across the face with full force, making her stagger with the blow.

“Damn you and your platitudes, Cweneira! Do you think you truly speak from the mouth of Matra, or are yours the words of a scared, reckless woman? Everyone I’ve assembled here at the cliffs will die today and I dare you to stop me! I’ll save you and the whole kingdom alone if I have to and I’ll do it despite your best efforts to frustrate me, you relentless harpy!

A moment of tense silence. Sulymeigh gazed at her with contempt, irate that she would defy him time and time again, and Cweneira glared back at him, cheek reddening, seething that she could do nothing to sway his royal will. Her fiery frustration then turned into cold hate, and she spoke to him with all her scorn.

“So be it. Kill them all and reject the Goddess’s protection. Rebuke me as always and see if you actually profit this time. But when evil marches to the foot of the kingdom and breaks through the gates, when you hear the blood-curdling cries of your dying soldiers as they’re cut down where they stand, don’t look for me to be by your side. When the creatures of Red Hell close in around you and Matra is nowhere to be found, when the denizens of the depths drag you

down to their abode and make you answer for all the angry souls you sent there, maybe then you'll be sorry you spurned my counsel before it even reached your ears."

She turned and walked back toward Dun-Branson and Wrendor. Sulymeigh watched her leave his side, forbidding himself from being shaken by her words. With forced composure, he turned back towards the Oculus and its Vicar.

"We accept. Throughout the coming days, you two will stay in the castle dungeons, only to be let out when we request you. Will you retire to your cells now or remain for the execution?"

The Vicar turned to the Oculus. The thing let go of her arm and turned palms up. Its Vicar grinned wickedly and responded.

"Oh, we will stay. We will stay and give them a proper send-off."

Sulymeigh gestured to the line of soldiers. Two of them broke rank and approached the Oculus and Vicar, throwing chained cuffs around their wrists and escorting them back behind the line of soldiers. Sulymeigh followed and joined up with his council to watch the execution. He ended up beside Cweneira who was now looking down at her feet with crossed arms, purposefully avoiding the king's gaze. Wrendor stood near Cweneira with an austere look as he viewed the Red Kin past the shoulders of the soldiers, whereas Dun-Branson was expressionless. The soldiers, who stood a few dozen paces away from the condemned congregation, now lowered their spears and advanced toward the crowd, slowly encircling them to drive them over the edge of the cliffs.

Then, as dusk glowed yellow and orange over the earth, as the setting sun dipped low and touched the line of inky haze in the west, the Oculus smiled.

Its bloody teeth were exposed to the air for several seconds in an unsettling grin before it formed a circular shape with his lips and produced a low, steady note. The dark Vicar's eyes flashed with exhilaration, and then she too opened her mouth and sang her own tone with the Oculus, sustaining a dissonance that reverberated unnaturally in the air.

The cultists reacted in variation. Soft peacefulness came over some in their number as they closed their eyes and sang out steady notes as well, adding to the mounting cacophony. Others began to wail as if in terrible agony; they fell to their knees at the cliffs' edge and began to rake their nails down their faces, sobbing and screaming uncontrollably. Others still began bouts of maniacal laughter as they threw their heads back, dug their nails into their scalps, and tore out their own hair.

The Easterners were images of pure terror. They desperately tried pushing their way through the wailing mass of people to find any path of escape, but the soldiers had them completely surrounded. Slowly, all the cultists in their unnerving activity began to walk backwards off the cliff, sustaining their various pitches, cries and laughter in their descent all the way down to the jagged, bloodstained shore of the Solemn Sea below. The foreigners were the last to meet their demise as the soldiers pushed them over the edge at spear-point, and they too screamed all the way to the bottom until silenced by the rocks of the seashore, adding themselves to the macabre feast for the gulls.

Now that the condemned lay dead at the foot of the cliff, now that the salty sea lapped up the dark blood of the corpse pile, the Oculus and its Vicar ceased their singing, but their dark song continued to linger in the air as if the breeze of the fading dusk sustained it, and its dissonance did not quiet until the sun had sunk below the pitch-black horizon in the west. Even the next day, the wind would echo the song of the Oculus when the sun touched the Black Haze,

only ceasing when the sun dipped out of sight, and thus this dissonant hymn of slaughter would return every day at sunset, up until the very end of days for Wry Dragael.

III. The Advent of Red Hell

Inside the white chapel, Cweneira stood before a large basin of water at the northern wall. She produced a sizable empty vial from inside her silver robes and filled it with water from the basin. She then carried this vial to the foot of the Matra's statue and, after setting it on a blue oblong pillow on the granite floor there, she stepped back a few paces and knelt before the godly effigy. The queenly Vicar of Matra muttered incantations in quick succession, and soon the water in the vial began to take on lustrous properties, reflecting the light with a brighter sheen and refracting it at innumerable angles.

Having produced the waters of Healing's Haste, the Dragaelic queen took the vial and put it back into her silver robes. She strode over to the exit in the southern wall of the chapel and passed through it, proceeding straight into the intermediate passage between the chapel and the great hall, a dim corridor lined with torches along its narrow walls. She passed into the great hall and paced over the wide red carpet to approach a group of guards stationed by the doors to the entrance hall.

"You," she said, pointing at two random guards, "follow me."

With the twin entourage at her back, the queen led the soldiers to the east wall of the great hall and down a dark staircase. The light of day dwindled with every step they took in their descent; torches on the curving walls lit their path down into the gathering gloom, and the trio soon reached the dark dungeons at the bottom.

The entire prison itself was a long, narrow space where only four could walk abreast. The walls were lined with sparse, shabby cells comprised of a stone wall, a wooden door and a bucket within. Cweneira and her guards traversed the length of the dungeon to find a unit at the very end where two soldiers stood guard. The queen peered through the window of the cell door descried in the flickering shadows the Oculus squatted down in a corner and the dark Vicar slumped against the back wall, dazed and bleeding from several percussive wounds to the head.

Cweneira addressed the two sentries standing before the cell. “Get the hell out of here! These are distinguished prisoners and I should have you disciplined like children!”

She seized a short sword at the hip of one of the sentries and hit them in the temples with the flat side. She threw the weapon at their feet, and after retrieving the short sword, the sentries left wounded in body and pride. Cweneira ordered her accompanying guards to take up the vacant posts and unlock the cell door, and she hurried to kneel down beside the dazed Vicar. Producing the waters of Healing’s Haste from her robes, she uncorked the vial and decanted the water into her own hand before lifting the dark Vicar’s chin, tilting her head back. The queen poured the water in her palm onto the various cuts on the Vicar’s head, which washed away the blood and caused platelets to rush to the wounds, immediately sealing off the bleeding and restoring her bruised skin to a healthy color.

“Ah, thank you,” said the dark Vicar.

“My sincerest apologies,” said Cweneira as she pocketed Healing’s Haste. “I truly didn’t believe our soldiers would treat clergy so inhumanely.”

“Well, I’m sure they think us inhuman to some extent,” replied the dark Vicar. “This is not the first time we’ve received such treatment.”

“It doesn’t look like they harmed the Oculus.”

“No, they didn’t. The guards wanted nothing to do with it. It does look a menace, I’ll give them that. It’s not entirely false to think that the Oculus, at least, is inhuman. The rite that ordains it strips its name and personality, but the expense allows it to become much closer to divinity than either you or I as Vicars could ever hope to be.”

“So the Vicar of the Oculus doesn’t become so distilled, so to speak?”

“No, my kind of Vicar is denied that honor. I will never shed the name of Rheagwen nor my dogged humanity.”

“Well, it seems your Oculus was dogged by humanity for little more than a decade. When was the last time the Oculus was an adolescent?”

“Never. It’s unprecedented for such a youth to become the Oculus, but nonetheless, it started showing the usual signs as soon as the former Oculus had passed. The boy’s eyes shriveled up and fell out of his head, but he still managed to find a butcher’s knife, file his teeth down on it, and make the cuts on his face.”

Cweneira turned her gaze to the Oculus, who had killed a mangy rat and was now using its long fingernails to skin the rodent with slow, surgical precision. After its layer of fur was removed, the hallowed adolescent began to dine on its raw flesh, biting off small morsels and chewing slowly.

Rheagwen noticed as well. “As I said before, our kind is not entirely devoid of civility. We sow our own crops, drink from wells of our own make, and congregate in worship. But still, others cannot help but fear and hate strange customs and unconventional gods.”

“That’s one aspect of your kind I never completely grasped,” said Cweneira. “The beings you worship are indeed unconventional. Not that I have any objection to it; our deities are different for sure, but they constitute the same pantheon. At the same time, however, I

understand why the common folk find reason to fear the Red Kin. You all align yourselves with dark beings that have committed themselves to the undoing of humanity. Why pay homage to such creatures?”

The dark Vicar smiled softly. “There are no truly good or evil beings in this world or the next, only those with their own agenda. Humans assign moral value to the goals of supernatural beings according to how humans are affected by the execution of those goals. All divine goals that are boon to humanity are labeled good and those that are hazardous are labeled evil, but these counterbalancing goals are not inherently good or evil outside a human’s perspective. You, my queen, have chosen to side with the benign gods that act in humanity’s benefit, so I’m sure the idea of divine benevolence appeals to you and is what attracted you to the position of Matra’s Vicar. It is given that Matra and the benign gods will not harm the people of earth, and in fact, their benevolence is so complete that they won’t harm even those who don’t kneel before them.

“On the other hand, the creatures of the Four Hells, whose world is called the Hilderilm, they further certain interests that are detrimental to humanity, but at the same time, they know that selectively sparing humans to use as agents can further those interests. They won’t refrain from killing the people of earth except for those that give them worship. Being human, the Red Kin are inherently within the protection of the benign gods, but we further secure our wellbeing by aiding the creatures the Hilderilm. Our ultimate philosophy is one of self-interest and preservation: allies to the malevolent will be spared their malice.”

Cweneira took a moment to process these statements.

“I surprise myself to say it, but that makes a lot of sense.”

“Glad to hear it. There are very few who can see past their initial impression.”

“Yes, that’s very aptly put. It has always seemed to be a matter of impression that would turn people away from you. But I’m sure you understand that even if one can follow the logic of your philosophy, it’s hard to swallow such a dark aesthetic.”

The dark Vicar’s eyes lit up. “Oh, but that’s part of the appeal! Our congregations are filled with those who are fascinated by the macabre aspects of the occult. Ours are the people who seek out blood and darkness, those who are enthralled at the harrowing sight of blood and comforted by the familiar dark. But you of all people would understand what it’s like to be fascinated by the otherworldly, to be mesmerized by the lofty grandeur of your divine patron.”

Cweneira’s furrowed brow began to soften.

“Yes, I know it, and I know it well. There’s only one word for it: awe. To be in the grandeur of their presence, to feel so lowly and humble among beings so impossibly powerful and magnificent. To know that their graces could elevate you to new heights while their whim could swiftly destroy you. It fills you with just as much wonder as it does unparalleled fear.”

A few moments of silence fell over them. Shadows danced on the cell walls as the bright torches flickered.

Rheagwen broke the quietude. “Now it’s my turn to be inquisitive. Why are you so submissive to Sulymeigh? Why do you permit his arrogance?”

“I don’t understand. How would I overrule his command? The title of a queen isn’t equal to that of a king, not in Wry Drageael anyway. And my office as Matra’s Vicar doesn’t place me above Sulymeigh either. In a strictly political sense, it merely grants me the capacity of advisor to the king regarding spiritual matters. Doesn’t the Red Kin have a chain of command?”

“Of course we do. The Oculus sits atop the hierarchy, then there’s the Vicar right below it, then the congregational leaders, and then the congregation at the bottom. Every level of the

hierarchy obeys the mandates of the levels above, but only as long as they're performing to satisfaction. So, if I were to be clearly leading the Red Kin away from their interests to promote my own, they would stop listening to me entirely. Actually, if I were to persist in the misuse of my title, the Kin would probably kill me and ordain a new Vicar. My point is that disobedience to selfish commands can be beneficial because it disincentivizes the further issuance of those commands. And we both know the bodies rotting at the bottom of the cliffs weren't put there for completely selfless reasons. Really now, what would happen if you refused to indulge the king's wayward whims?"

"Well, it would be considered treason and Sulymeigh would have Dun-Branson and his men put me in one of these cells."

"What if you were clearly justified in defying the king?" Rheagwen rebutted. "And what if Dun-Branson were to be sympathetic to that? What kind of lofty ideals stop a general backed by an army and a queen backed by the Goddess from defying a mortal self-serving ruler? Why should blind deference to the chain of command prevent you from doing what's best for yourself and the kingdom? Don't you understand? There's nothing real holding you back! You're letting a mere notion paralyze you and it could spell the end of Wry Dragael!"

Cweneira furrowed her brow, not knowing what to think. A soldier emerged from the stairwell, ran down the narrow hallway and approached her.

"My queen," he said, "the scouts have returned with a survivor from Rockwell who has a first-hand account of the Black Haze. The king has requested your presence for the survivor's immediate interrogation."

Vicar Rheagwen shot Cweneira a look. The Dragaelic queen sighed and responded to her. “Sometimes there’s order in deference. And in a crisis, order will always be what’s best for the kingdom.”

She turned to the two sentries guarding the cell.

“Sulymeigh will want the cultists present as well. Escort the two of them behind us.”

As the sentries pulled the Oculus and Vicar from their cell, the soldier addressed Cweneira. “Please, my queen, we are in a state of emergency. We must make haste, I’ll explain on the way.” All six of them hurried through the dungeon to the dark stairwell, the sentries and cultists only a few paces behind the queen and her escort.

Halfway in their ascent, Cweneira’s escort began briefing her.

“The king hasn’t allowed the man from Rockwell to divulge much in your absence, but we know he goes by the name Bardyr and that he used to be the minstrel for the royal court.”

“He used to be?”

“Yes, my queen. It appears there’s no one left in Rockwell to entertain. The envoys report that the Black Haze reduced all the inhabitants of the city to morseled remains, even the dogs and livestock. Our scouts found this Bardyr still alive in the heart of the city, the Haze having apparently passed over him. The scourge could be on its way to our kingdom as we speak.”

His words sparked Cweneira’s memory. She recalled the miserable black crow in the council hall and the hideous winged arachnid that had devoured it. The queen shuddered. She prayed the castle could be locked down in time.

As she reached the top of the stairs with the escorts and cultists, Cweneira saw a frenzy of activity in the great hall where her hopes were already being carried out. Various attendants of the castle were hurrying to place wooden boards over the windows and nail them into the walls.

The streaming daylight became steadily blocked out; several handmaids were hastening to light torches and fix them to their mounts on the walls. Soldiers were running in from all parts of the castle to the vast doors that led to the entrance hall where Dun-Branson was positioned, barking orders to them. In the clamor of ringing hammers and marching boots, Sulymeigh stood in the center of the crimson carpet lying in the center of the great hall with Wrendor and a thin man dressed in dark blue. Cweneira strode over with escorts and cultists in tow.

“Ah, Cwen,” said Sulymeigh, but the fair-haired queen ignored him and approached the man in dark blue instead.

“Are you Bardyr the minstrel?” she asked.

“Indeed,” he said. He stared off, a look of terrified rumination on his face.

“Look at me,” she demanded. As his eyes met hers, she became aware of her audience. Sulymeigh and Wrendor stood to her left and the dark Vicar and Oculus to her right, listening with rapt attention.

“I truly cannot imagine what you have just witnessed,” she continued, “but rest assured that any and all protection Wry Dragael can afford will be yours. I need you to tell us what happened in Rockwell.”

A heavy pause before Bardyr spoke.

“I’m afraid that no shield wielded by mortal man, nor wall of any stone hewn from the earth will be able to safeguard us against the oncoming horror. The Haze was sent with only the most wrathful and terrible designs for us, and its bloodlust is swift and violent. Red Hell has opened its full fury upon us.

“It came at midday and blotted out the sun. The light suddenly stopped streaming through the windows as I performed for King Owen, and we soon heard the buzz of the pestilent swarm

and the wailing of commoners outside. Screams were muffled by gargled blood, and the crimson spray shot so high that it entered through the windows of the throne room on the third floor. The red mist touched my face and I lost all composure. I devolved into panic. A type of panic that pulls the most visceral reactions out of your body. My gut contracted so deeply and suddenly that I nearly choked on my own vomit, and my mind abandoned all rational thought as I succumbed to blinding fear. The mounting dread inside me turned so swiftly to a complete, horrific frenzy that I became afraid of my own self as I ran. I ran like an animal being hunted by an unforeseen predator. I fled without direction or regard for anything else. Pure instinct took me down the lengthy halls of the castle as the sound of wailing and crying began to swell. The cacophony of screams and bloodshed had become ubiquitous by the time I found myself at the doors of the armory, which I threw open and slammed shut behind me. I fumbled around in the lightless room, tripping over various weapons until I found a short sword in the dark and brandished it with a white-knuckled grip. I hunched down in a corner while my whole body shook with such complete tension that my muscles ached and seized up as I tried to quiet my breathing.

“Then, through the rising din outside, I discerned glimpses of articulable speech, whispers from an unholy voice in the high frequencies of human screams. And then my heart nearly stopped, for the voiceless utterings addressed me directly, by name, and they conveyed to me a message. A message to be imparted to you, Sulymeigh.”

Bardyr looked at the king.

““It is not enough for you to die, for you must suffer.””

All eyes turned to the king. Sulymeigh stood rooted on the spot, wide-eyed and frozen with fear.

“Oh fuck,” said Vicar Rheagwen. She smiled with a horrible toothy grin and began laughing giddily. “Oh fuck, Sulymeigh, what have you done? What kind of atrocities have you committed to deserve the full wrath of Retribution? Oh fuck, I almost can’t believe it! What an honor to witness the Terribly Incarnate!”

Confusion and panic gripped Sulymeigh. “What does that mean, woman? What the hell does that mean?”

The dark Vicar laughed mirthfully. Sulymeigh grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her violently. The low buzz of insect wings began to sound ubiquitously from outside the castle.

“What the fuck does that mean, woman!? You swore to advise me, now tell me what’s going on!”

The unsheathing of swords resounded from outside the gates of the entrance hall.

“Oh, you’ll see,” she said smirking. “You’ll all see soon enough. And remember to turn away from its eyes. You’d better not look into its eyes!”

Her expression became severe and crazed. Eyes wide, she gripped Sulymeigh’s face with both hands and pulled him close, their eyes inches away from each other.

“LOOK AT ME,” she growled through clenched teeth. “DON’T LOOK IT IN THE EYES.”

The screaming of soldiers and the snapping of bones filled the air as the buzz continued its crescendo. Sulymeigh tore away from Rheagwen’s grasp and looked all around him in the dark, torch-lit room, his eyes wild as panic seized him.

“Where is the Haze now? How far has it reached?”

“It’s impossible to tell!” exclaimed Wrendor. “All the windows are boarded up!”

Bardyr gripped his stomach. “Oh god...” He bent over and began dry heaving.

The sun touched the black horizon once again and the song of the Oculus first heard at the cliffs returned, adding to the cacophony of insect drone and human screams. The Oculus, silent until now, howled in horrible pain as it gripped its face, and everyone turned. They all watched in horror as the Oculus brandished its sharp nails and lacerated itself three times, once on the forehead and once on each cheek, cutting its scars open.

The cuts blinked open to reveal three sickly green eyes.

The blindfolded Oculus stared with its new sight at the horrified onlookers, who beheld in the flickering torchlight a triangle of eyes across its face. Sulymeigh recoiled in disgust and nearly tripped over Bardyr, who was retching on his hands and knees.

“Oh god,” spoke Cweneira, her hand over her mouth. “What the hell is happening?” She stepped back and began reciting rapid prayers, her gaze never leaving the Oculus’ face.

Rheagwen stood staring in fascination, eyes full of wonder and mouth agape

Bardyr’s heaving now produces blood. He coughs up a few drops onto the floor, then a sizeable splatter, then a thick, heavy outpouring of red erupts from his throat. His face becomes swollen and the veins in his forehead protrude, pulsing rapidly under his skin. Finally, the thing in Bardyr’s stomach pushes its way up his throat, splitting open his jaw and exposing raw muscles and tendons to the air. Dark blood pours down his chin as he tries to scream past the massive reptilian snout that emerges from his mouth, glistening with dark blood. Black and jagged, Retribution the Larva pushes its gore-dripping maw out of the minstrel’s mouth, baring its hook-like teeth and spewing inhuman utterings.

“Run, Sulymeigh!” cried Rheagwen. “Run before the head comes out and don’t look back, don’t look into its eyes!!”

Sulymeigh was frozen where he stood. Retribution's raspy, unholy speech became fast and frenzied as it slowly wormed its way out of Bardyr's raw, ruptured throat. The miserable minstrel quaked violently on his hands and knees in a rising pool of his own blood as the hideous monster emerged.

The king's transfixion was short-lived. The Oculus turned to face him, broke apart its chains in one swift motion and lunged. Adrenaline shot through Sulymeigh's body as he turned tail and bolted for the spiral staircase. The Oculus roared and gave chase on all fours, catching Sulymeigh by the leg at the foot of the stairwell. The king fell to the floor and the three-eyed man-beast crawled on top of him, pinning him facedown as he desperately tried to reach out for the first step of the stairs. He struggled underneath the weight of the Oculus, frantically trying to throw it off his back as he heard Retribution slithering over, its long larval body mucking across the floor on a trail of the minstrel's blood.

In one last act of survival, Sulymeigh shut his eyes and clamped his hands over them, breathing heavily and gritting his teeth. He heard a vicious, disgusting snarl and cried out in pain as the Oculus lacerated the back of his neck with a quick swipe of its nails. Blood from the wounds dripped down to his Adam's apple and the nerves along the spine in his neck detached from the vertebrae, making Sulymeigh cry out in unprecedented agony. The nerves bundled together to form optic nerves, which sprouted throbbing eyeballs that pushed their way out through the cuts in his neck.

With the eyes in his head shut tight and his mouth open in an endless scream, Sulymeigh saw everything behind him with his unnatural sight, and in the haunting torchlight, he beheld a ring of glowing green eyes.

IV. Retribution the Larva

As he trudged up the stone stairwell, King Sulymeigh's thoughts were heavy with despair. Alone and without his vassals' eyes on him, he stopped for a moment and closed his eyes, brow furrowed and posture slack. Several seconds passed before he forced his eyes open and resumed his ascent, holding himself with his usual air of stateliness. A king of Wry Drageal could afford no appearance of weakness, even in these hopeless circumstances.

His despair gave way to a strange sense of recollection as he ascended the steps. Sulymeigh had walked this spiral staircase many times before, but this occasion inspired a particularly stark moment of *deja vú*. He could discern an ephemeral memory of this day as if he had dreamed of it the previous night. The king furrowed his brow; this vague recollection was just as puzzling as it was unsettling.

He absent-mindedly scratched the back of his neck, his nails raking over only skin and thin hair.

Sulymeigh paused to look out of a west-seeing window in the stairwell and his concern deepened. The Black Haze lay low on the horizon, still and unwavering, but ominous nonetheless. He had the feeling it hadn't moved for several days now, but he had no certainty in this. In fact, the more he delved into his memories, the less certain he felt about them. The king was struck by a tinge of fear, but he quickly assuaged it by blaming his hazy faculties on a lack of sleep.

Sulymeigh reached the summit of the stairs and was met with a wide wooden door. He grasped the iron handle and pushed, entering a regal sunlit hall adorned with stain-glass windows

and blue tapestries. At the long dark table in the middle of the room sat his council. Cweneira, Wrendor and Dun-Branson all stood up upon his arrival and bowed low.

“Spare me –” Sulymeigh began, pausing briefly. “Spare me the decorum...” He trailed off and his brow furrowed again. This moment felt more uncanny than the last.

“My king, are you – are you feeling well?” Cweneira said, wearing an expression of concern that matched Wrendor’s and Dun-Branson’s.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Sulymeigh stated groggily while seating himself. “Just haven’t been sleeping well is all.”

They sat down somewhat uneasily and remained silent, waiting for the king to speak. But he did not immediately propose any matters nor open the floor to the council. The three council members passed worried looks among themselves.

“Where’s Agritha?” Dun-Branson had ventured a few plain words.

Sulymeigh looked up. “Agritha?”

“Yes, Agritha. Tall, bald-headed man, Master of Coin?”

Cweneira interjected. “My king, have you not informed Dun-Branson yet?”

Sulymeigh was perplexed. “Informed him of what?”

“...that Agritha is dead? That he now lies at the bottom of the cliffs with the Red Kin?”

Shock came over Dun-Branson. “You had him killed? On what pretense?”

“No, I – wait, what?” Sulymeigh said. “I didn’t kill him at the cliffs yet, I haven’t killed anyone at the cliffs yet...”

Sulymeigh began to notice the oddities in the room. The iron grail of augury stood in the center of the long table, but five blue sapphires were now inlaid evenly around the head of the cup just below the circumference of the rim. The steel on the side facing the king was warped,

sculpted in a way that resembled the protrusion of a nose and the curvature of a mouth. He stared at the melded face of the chalice that met his gaze with sapphire eyes.

“My king,” said Cweneira, her voice tinged with concern, “have you received any word about the excursion to recover the talisman of Matra the Omnipotent?”

The king ignored her in his perturbation and cast his gaze around the room. His eyes fell upon the window dedicated to the augury of the birds, and in front of it, a black crow sat atop the ritual perch.

“What the hell...”

The crow blinked, and a third green eye opened on its forehead. Vehemently recoiling in his chair, Sulymeigh gripped the armrests with eyes wide in horror. Startling his council, they all jumped in their seats. With the bird staring directly at Sulymeigh with its three-fold vision, Cweneira added her gaze, sharply turning her attention to the king.

“What is it, Sully? What just happened?”

Sulymeigh turned his gaze to her, eyes wild with fear. “What do you mean? Look at the bird, Cwen, what the fuck is that thing?”

“What are you talking about?”

He looked back to the window. The crow and the perch were gone. The chalice had also disappeared inexplicably as if it were never there, leaving the long tabletop bare. Every oddity in the room had vanished.

“It was just there! The crow and the chalice, they were there! I swear it!”

“What do you mean?” Cweneira responded, her voice full of anxiety. “Sully, you’re starting to scare me! What’s happening to you?”

Sulymeigh's memories came flooding back. "I'm fine, it's everything else that doesn't make sense! We've already had this council meeting and it wasn't like this before, and I didn't kill Agritha yet! He dies along with the Red Kin and the Easterners at the cliffs, only now that hasn't happened yet because it comes after this meeting! You were all were there for it!"

As soon as the last word left his lips, the swiftly approaching creature finally arrived. It careened through the open window and landed on the table, and the four noblemen laid their unsuspecting gaze upon it. Agritha's bald, severed head reared itself on legs of human ribs that protruded from its long outstretched tongue. Leathery wings made of human skin extended upwards from the drooling appendage and twelve green eyes glowed at the tip. The arachnid gnashed its pincers and Agritha's skyward eyes rolled back in its thorax-head as it flexed its abdomen-tongue. Into the forehead was carved the remainder of Red Hell's message: FOR YOU MUST SUFFER.

Shrieks erupted all around. They scrambled out of their seats, seeking to put all possible distance between them and the macabre arachnid.

"Go! Save yourselves!" Dun-Branson cried. He unsheathed a dagger from his hip and squared up with the creature. Sulymeigh, Cweneira and Wrendor bolted for the door and ran down the spiral stairs with dizzying fright. Had the three of them peered out of the west-seeing windows, they would have seen the accelerating spread of the Haze across the sky.

The three noblemen descended the last step and reached the great hall at the bottom. They caught their breath as they saw the scene they had entered: various attendants of the castle were hurrying to place wooden boards over the windows and nail them into the stone walls. As they did so, the streaming daylight was steadily blocked out; several handmaids were hastening to light torches and fix them to their mounts on the walls.

“What the hell is this?” barked Sulymeigh at the attendants. “Who ordered you to barricade the castle?” They ignored him as if his words never reached their ears and continued their hurried tasks. The king’s anger began to flare but quickly dissipated, for his gaze fell upon Lewyn and Caerlyn. His son stood next to the wall to the left of the wide crimson carpet while his infant daughter had plopped herself down next to him, her stubby legs sticking straight out. Sulymeigh and Cweneira ran up to their children.

The king knelt down to face Lewyn, his expression full of anxiety. “What are you two doing here? You need to go, now! Take your sister and follow your mother back to your room!”

Lewyn responded with a question. “Did you see it? Did it come and find you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You saw the Visitor, didn’t you? The messenger told me the Visitor would come and find you and then everything would change and I could be king!” Lewyn wore a giddy smile.

Sulymeigh was perturbed. “Wait, what? What Visitor? When did this happen?”

“Well, a long time ago I was playing in my room and then this really big black spider flew in through the window, as black as midnight. I was scared at first but then it told me that it just wanted to be friends, so I said ‘What’s your name?’ and it said I could call it the messenger...”

The light peeking in through the boarded windows began to dim and the room slowly darkened.

“...it asked if I wanted to be king one day and I said ‘Yup, I really would.’ Then it said that the Visitor could make me king real soon, but I had to do what it said. It told me not to tell you about it until you see the Visitor...”

All sunlight had fled the great hall. In the flickering torchlight, Sulymeigh could see nothing but his son standing right in front of him. The rest of the room had sunk into inky blackness.

“...but the messenger told me you saw it! And now I get to be king.”

Indistinct mutterings emanated from a dark corner of the room. Sulymeigh turned sharply in the direction of the sound and saw nothing but blackness. His heart full of dread, he took a glowing torch from the wall and turned back to his children, but Lewyn and Caerlyn had vanished. Icy fear gripped Sulymeigh as he stood alone in the vast room, the unknown voice echoing quietly through the darkness.

Holding the light in front of him, the king began to move towards the voice, his steps careful and hesitant, his pace slow with trepidation. As the torch steadily revealed more of his path with every step, the mutterings grew more apparent, and he discerned a feminine tone in the soft, eerie voice. Creeping closer, Sulymeigh extended his torch. The light fell upon Vicar Rheagwen, who continued her accursed incantation:

“...left you almost nothing to effectuate your designs from the scant resources of Red Hell. No trees grow from the dust, no ore lies in the waste, no clay rests in the banks of blood. But there is no lack of human bodies.”

She is sunk on both knees, her arms extended, palms supine, eyes closed. Hanging over her from behind is the three-eyed Oculus, its hands on her shoulders, its cracked lips next to her ear whispering inhuman utterings.

“And so,” she continued, “in their lust for invention, the brooding denizens of your domain piece together their devices from the butchered anatomy of the damned. Give sight to those who call these practices abhorrent while you provide the culling that balances the world.

Grant us favor in our sympathy and we shall invoke your Advent, behold your mesmerizing grandeur, and commune with a Hell sympathetic to us.”

Sulymeigh heard retching behind him and felt a pool of warm blood reach his heels. He froze first, then, as the torches around the room spontaneously lit themselves one by one, he slowly turned on the spot and once more beheld the Advent of Red Hell in all its terrible glory.

Bardyr was on hands and knees, dark blood pouring from his mouth, his face strained and eyes watering, his stomach writhing with the creature from Hell. As Sulymeigh faced this scene in the full illumination of the great hall, he witnessed that which he had turned his gaze from. Bardyr’s jaw tore open, blood spurting from the corners of his rupturing mouth, and the dark larval beast emerged, its segmented body scraping his raw gums and tearing out his teeth from their roots. Face-to-face with the monster, Sulymeigh stood horribly aghast, for he now saw in the glow of the torchlight the full and terrible visage of Red Hell’s manifestation.

Its head was five-fold and reptilian, as if the top half of a three-eyed dragon head had been duplicated five times and arranged in pentaradial symmetry. Fifteen lime green eyes glowed around the circumference of its head while its snouts opened outwards from the center, peeling back on itself like a blossom of scaly flesh to reveal bloodied hook-like teeth that grew all the way down its throat. From the center of its pitch-black gullet came flickering crimson tongues covered in porous pustules that burst open, spewing pale gaseous spores into the air.

It unfolded ceaselessly. The head of the Larva continued to open outwards on itself, endlessly turning its insides out. Its tongues spread from the center of its throat and flaps of overlapping flesh emerged. The teeth coating its gullet grew soft and writhed on the extending flaps of raw flesh; in a matter of moments, the head had taken the likeness of a bloody rose made of skin and cilia. Its hideous form peeled back on itself again as a giant lizard eye came forth

from the center of the veiny flesh-flaps, and the cilia grew long and wrinkly, fingers that arranged themselves around the eye like lashes, gripping the center of the oblong pupil and tearing it open into a vertical mouth of dripping fangs.

Sulymeigh stood frozen, equally terrified and spellbound. His feeble mind struggled to comprehend the disparate yet impossibly combined aspects of nature encapsulated in this terrible being, this monster epitomizing all that the human mind immediately recognizes as repulsive and inimical. The king barely had time to fully absorb its hideous visage before the cloud of spores it had spewed into the air hit him full in the face, and he fell to his knees on the blood-soaked floor, coughing and hacking. His eyes burned as the hallucinogen from hell permeated his ocular capillaries and he gasped for air as the spores coagulated into wooly cocoon silk in his throat.

The blood he was kneeling in curdled into shape. The ripples in the crimson pool elongated and writhed, forming sanguine snakes with glistening red scales. The blood-born serpents wrapped around his legs and dug their fangs into his thighs, anchoring the king in his genuflection. Sulymeigh cried out with the sudden pain and struggled against their grasp, but their bodies held their coil strong and their fangs had sunk their injection deep. The king could do little more than hold his stance through the constriction and needle-sharp pain while beholding the emergence of Hell itself.

“By the gods!” Wrendor had reappeared a few meters away. Pointing his staff at the larval beast, he addressed Retribution as it towered over the king. “You have no true power here, you putrid grub! This is a sanctuary for humanity’s protectors! May the benign gods banish you to your hellish domain!”

The Larva continued to push its way out of Bardyr’s ruptured throat. It leaned closer to Sulymeigh, who looked on in horror as a dozen pulsing, nerve-like tendrils slowly emerged from

its ceaselessly morphing head. As they sought to wrap themselves around him, the king desperately fought against them and batted them away from his helpless position.

Wrendor reacted with surprising swiftness. Striding over to the beast, he grasped one of the various talismans that hung from the cords on his neck, tore it off and quickly tied it to the middle of his staff. Striking the floor hard with the bottom, the talisman of Haulyd the Dawnbringer bounced off the staff in its tether and clanged like a great bell. The tip of the staff began to glow white-hot with the flame of Haulyd, the sun god to whom Matra imparted her light so that he may chase away the evils of the dark. With this divine effulgence, High Cleric Wrendor now rushed to banish the hellish creature that assailed his king.

“Hurry, Wrendor!” Sulymeigh cried. The hideous tendrils had wrapped themselves around the king’s arms, immobilizing his resistance. Leech-like suckers at the end of the stringy appendages attached themselves to the veins in Sulymeigh’s biceps while more of them crawled up his torso to the arteries in his neck. As his blood drained into the fleshy tendrils, his body became more saturated with the hallucinogen in its increasing proportion, and he grew pale and shook violently.

The cleric raised his god-strengthened conduit over his head and brought it down with all his might, striking the Larva squarely on the side of its head with the glowing tip.

The world froze. Time stopped in its tracks upon the staff’s impact. Sulymeigh was immobilized in his kneeling position and Wrendor stood as still as a statue in his offensive stance. The tears on Bardyr’s face and the blood on his chin were halted in their runny course. Even the ripples in the pool of blood froze in their ebb and flow.

The Larva reversed its unfolding as everything else remained motionless in time. Withdrawing its leech-like tendrils, its head retracted inwards on itself, passing through its

previous permutations until it returned to its original five-fold dragonhead. It turned to face Wrendor and its fifteen glowing eyes flashed angrily as it concentrated all the spite in Red Hell on the impudent cleric.

Wrendor started to shake uncontrollably. He screamed in agony as masses of sharp, chitinous spider legs began to grow in his bowels and brain. As they sought all avenues out of his body in their rapid growth, they severed his optic nerves, skewered his eyeballs and pushed them out of his head. Others crawled up his digestive tract to his esophagus, cutting off his tongue at the root and shredding it to a bloody pulp, while others still extended downwards and pierced through his bladder and intestines.

The hallucinogen coursing through Sulymeigh took effect. His vision became distorted in its perception, as if his eyes were made of cracked glass. He saw everything before him through multiple refracted angles and dizzying perspectives as horrible colors flooded his sight: the sickly green of vomit, the vivid yellow of urine and the dull pink of raw flesh. Within mere moments, his vision became a cubic nightmare, a mind-numbing lens through which Sulymeigh bore witness to the High Cleric's destruction.

With his head thrown back and face turned skywards, Wrendor was now gagging in his cries of pain as countless giant spider legs burst out from his mouth and eye sockets. Large volumes of blood poured from these gaping holes in his head and ran down his neck to his torso and pelvis where writhing arachnoid limbs erupted from his urethra and anus. His feet left the floor as these chitinous appendages dug into the ground and lifted his body up in their unstoppable downwards growth, and when they finally ceased their extension, Wrendor hung suspended ten feet in the air, now dead from being skewered from the inside out. With limbs

hanging limp and streams of blood running down his legs, the cleric's corpse twitched weakly from the middle of this terrible display of impalement.

Sulymeigh cast his refracted gaze away from Wrendor's mangled corpse. Fixated on his own survival, he seized the crimson snakes down by their snouts, forcibly pulled their fangs out of his legs and cast them to the ground. As they hit the pool of blood at his feet, they shrieked and melted into the ripples, returning to their liquid state as Retribution pulled the rest of its long body out of Bardyr's raw gaping throat. In an unnerving defiance of this world's physics, the Larva's body never touched the floor as the last of its tail left the minstrel's lips, instead hanging several feet above the ground as it squirmed and corkscrewed through the air. The floating larval beast then set its sights on Sulymeigh and lunged, descending upon him in wicked helical flight.

The king took off in thoughtless panic. Blind, desperate instinct seized him as he sped away from the spiraling hell that chased him, burning rage in its glowing ring of eyes. Focused on nothing but narrow survival, Sulymeigh bolted up the steps of the helical staircase with a haste only available to hapless prey, but he was already losing the race; Retribution's hot breath condensed on the back of his neck. In one last mindless attempt at escape, the king hurled himself through a westward window, desperately hoping to land in the branches of a tall tree to break his fall. He reached out in his swift descent, but his fingers failed to find an outstretched limb. Diving headfirst into the ground, his forehead first touched the hard earth and the vertebrae in his neck shattered with the immediate impact. His chest was crushed, his kneecaps burst, and the grass soaked up his blood.

The setting sun was nearly touching the edge of the Black Haze when the Oculus emerged from the castle and strode over to the king's remains. Kneeling next to the king's body, it grabbed the head by the hair and turned it over. The hallowed adolescent leaned over so that its

cracked lips hovered over the dead king's ear and whispered the first words it had ever uttered in a human tongue.

“It is not enough for you to die, Sulymeigh, for you are not yet done with your suffering.”

V. Retribution the Pupa

As he trudged up the stone stairwell, King Sulymeigh's thoughts were heavy with despair. Suddenly, he realized where he was going and what would await him in the council chambers.

“Oh no...”

He was sinking deeper and deeper into this cyclical hell.

“No no no no no no no...”

He turned around on the spot and hurried down the spiral staircase, his eyes glued to his rapid feet lest he turn his head and see what was next designed for him. He reached the bottom of the stairs, crossed the length of the great hall and rushed through the doors to the wide entrance hall. There he hastened toward the tall doors that led out of the castle, for harrowing necessity called for him to flee Wry Dragael. He must put all possible distance between him and the castle that housed the horror.

He quickly reached the end of the entrance hall and pushed against the tall heavy doors that promised him escape. They creaked and groaned with their weight but soon gave way to Sulymeigh's desperate strained efforts. As they slowly opened, bright light streamed in and flooded the king's vision, ushering a rush of optimism that flooded him with equal intensity. The

sudden pallid sunlight blinded him for a moment, but his eyes adjusted to behold the scene that met him.

A scene of crushing despair: Sulymeigh had stepped into the council chambers from which he fled.

A vision of unparalleled fear: he had entered into the most terrifying version of the chambers thus far. Cweneira and Dun-Branson sat in their usual seats at the council table and looked up at the king expectantly, but they sat frozen, unnaturally still as if their muscles had turned to stone and their pulses ceased to reverberate within.

And then there was the thing that paraded itself as Wrendor.

It took the form of a skinless man in the cleric's seat, its muscles and bones exposed to the open air, glistening raw and bloody in the sunlight. It wore robes of yellow snakeskin dabbled with streaks of black scales, and the red fleshy hands that protruded from its sleeves bore sharp, seven-inch long nails. With no facial features save for a grinning mouth full of fangs that stretched from ear to ear, it wore the High Cleric's face like a mask, hooks dug into Wrendor's jawline and temples on both sides. Tethered fishing line wrapped around the denizen's wide head, securing the cleric's smiling face in place where the denizen lacked any human features. But this sick parody of the High Cleric was just one of the terrifying sights that lay before the king.

A centerpiece of surreal horror: Sulymeigh viewed, in the place of the bejeweled iron chalice, his own disembodied head in the middle of the table. Having been scalped, the top of the skull was cleanly sliced off, and with the brain having been removed, the hollow excavation made a cup out of the duplicate head. Taking the place of the five sapphires inlaid around the rim

of the cup were five blue eyes in a ring around the head that steadily rotated in their unnatural sockets, each one out of sync with the others.

The three-eyed Oculus sat at the far end of the table holding two black crow-feather quills with a motionless messenger arachnid before it. As it dipped the feather pens into Sulymeigh's brain that lay at hand to its left, the quills became dabbled with blood and the Oculus' three eyes began their own disjointed rotation. In its unholy trance, the hallowed adolescent inscribed strange red letters into the spidery herald, both hands scrawling simultaneously. Finishing its ambidextrous inscription, it took the black tarantula in both hands and cast it out of the window. The bug soared on wooly moth wings towards the Cliffs of Wrath, and with its message to Red Hell on its way, the blindfolded Oculus turned to Sulymeigh.

“You truly thought you could escape your fate?” it said. “You really believed that fleeing your kingdom would give you some avenue out of this hell designed for you? Not even death offered escape. You will never die until you suffer your full punishment, Sulymeigh. There is nothing in this world or the next that will grant you any respite from this livid nightmare until Retribution is done with you.”

The Oculus stood up. The Black Haze creeping through the shining sky touched the sun once again and Red Hell's metamorphosis advanced. Mouth steadily elongating, the Oculus' cheekbones expanded outwards and tore through the skin of its face. The eyes on the cheeks of the man-beast stretched with the elongation and its carnivorous teeth sharpened as its orifice morphed into a crocodilian maw made of twisted flesh and bones. Unphased by its own disfigurement, the creature spoke throughout the gradual transformation as the buzz of insect wings crescendoed from outside.

“Do you not realize the power Hell holds over you and your company? **Your soldiers were routed where they stood guard and died screaming amidst our swarm.** Your minstrel guest was turned into a human vessel for the evil that manifests before you. Your only son gained favor with our envoy and became a pawn in your punishment. Not even your cleric was sacrosanct against Retribution, for he put up the merest resistance and his brittle body was destroyed.”

The chalice of Sulymeigh’s severed head spontaneously rose from the middle of the table and floated over to the reptilian Oculus, sapphire eyes rolling mindlessly in their sockets along the rim. Grasping the brain on its left, it held the pulsing organ over the head-chalice and squeezed a sickly pink liquid out of it into the cup, wringing out the brain like a sponge.

“And now you have demonstrated for the last time that your bloodline must be purged. The sins of the father have become the sins of the son time and time again, and now the divine must intervene to cull the runts of the litter. For countless generations has each descendent in your lineage been raised in neglect and abuse like a sapling tree planted in blighted soil, and without fail, these victims of raging patriarchs grow into violent rulers with minds sick from humiliations and beatings. Every time, they in turn bear blighted seed and nurtured it in the same trauma they themselves were raised in, perpetuating an endless cycle where your inheritance is violence and your heirlooms are scars. Every king in your lineage has made the people of Wry Dragael suffer for the cruelty that formed his youth.”

The buzz outside continued to swell as the Oculus held the head-chalice out to the king.

“Break the cycle, Sulymeigh. Drink and confront that which you already know. Drink and see how far these sickly roots run, how deeply the poison is laced into your mind. Drink and realize the extent of your misdeeds.”

Sulymeigh stepped back from the cranial chalice. “No, it’s not my fault! I never wanted to be king, I never – I didn’t mean for any of this to happen! Please...” His back was against the door. “I wasn’t suited for the kingship, it’s not my fault I was shit at it!”

The Oculus turned severe. “How long will you peddle that sorry excuse? Do you think a truly good man would deny his faults when they are laid bare for him to see?”

The faceless denizen spoke. “Sulymeigh does not see.” The mask of human flesh mouthed the words of the maw beneath it. “How many eyes will it take for him to see?”

A myriad of blue eyes sprouted up all over the face of the head-chalice from hairline to chin, their chameleon gaze joining the disjointed rotation.

“Drink, Sulymeigh,” the Oculus commanded. “Drink and you will finally see.”

Sulymeigh beheld the sight of his own face staring back at him with its multitude of eyes and he hesitated in his renewed revulsion. Without warning, the faceless denizen grabbed the back of the king’s head in one hand and the head-chalice in the other and brought them together so that the edge of the cup was up against the king’s lips. The swiftness of the action and the odor of the rancid concoction overwhelmed Sulymeigh, and he pushed the living goblet away to double over and repress his gag reflex. In doing so, he inadvertently struck the chalice so that half of the brew spilled out and splattered on the table. Dripping onto the floor, the dull pink liquid began to pool on the ground, coagulating into a semi-solid mass that squirmed and pulsed with primordial life.

“Did you think the truth would be easy to stomach?” the Oculus roared. “Steel your nerves and drink it! Drink it, you miserable fucking excuse for a man!”

The faceless denizen grabbed Sulymeigh by the hair and vehemently yanked him upright from his hunched position. It drew the chalice to his lips once more and the king held his breath

as he forced thick mouthfuls of the putrid brew down his throat, nearly retching upon feeling the gooey viscous liquid rush down his esophagus. Having emptied it into his gullet, he pushed the living goblet away, sweating from his forehead and drooling in his nausea. He gripped the table as he willed himself to keep it down, but as the slimy concoction hit his stomach, he gagged forcefully, bent over and vomited it onto the stone floor. Sulymeigh was spitting out the last chunks of his stomach when the Oculus berated him with wild fury in its eyes.

“You piss-poor piece of trash! Do you know how many better men before you were able to stomach it? You’re the worst type of cowardly degenerate piece of shit, you’re a fucking ignoramus and you’re blind to your own flaws! You do nothing but bring misery and suffering to everyone around you and you’re ugly and rotten down to the core!”

The Oculus swiftly snatched up the shriveled brain on the table, dug his nails into it and tore it open down the middle to reveal a large wriggling egg inside.

“Look at how your thoughts manifest!”

The splotched egg burst and all manner of hideous creatures poured out: bright red spiders, black scorpions, squirming centipedes and hissing rattlesnakes. They erupted from the ruptured brain in massive volumes, thousands of specimens spilling out all at once like pus from a ripe cyst. Sulymeigh turned tail and desperately tried to flee through the wooden door, but the iron handle remained locked as waves of horrid fauna covered the entire room from floor to ceiling: the walls, the table, the chalice, the faceless denizen and the Oculus, even Cweneira and Dun-Branson in their paralysis.

Sulymeigh screamed as the specimens swept over his feet like a rising tide and dropped from the ceiling onto his head like hail, and he frantically snatched the creatures out of his hair as they tried to burrow their way into his scalp. They climbed up his legs onto his torso, crawling

under his tunic and down into his trousers, but right as Sulymeigh thought he could withstand the assault no longer, the horrible creatures withdrew from his skin. After shedding themselves from his body and returning to the floor and ceiling, they disappeared through the cracks and crevices in the stone walls.

With hellish fauna now departed, Sulymeigh found himself in the dark entrance hall. No daylight streamed in past the boards nailed to the frames of the windows; the only illumination in the enveloping darkness was the light of wall-mounted torches, and in the dim glow of these glinting flames, the king bore witness to the next stage of Retribution's metamorphosis.

Hovering just above the floor, the Pupa hung suspended from the ceiling by sinuous strands of raw tendons and ligaments. Several feet tall, the giant chrysalis was stitched together from flayed skin that had been ripped from all parts of the human body. Sulymeigh gasped sharply upon recognizing the faces of bearded Dun-Branson and his soldiers sewn into the pulsing pupa, their eyes rotating erratically like the head-chalice. They called to him, begged him to carve them out of the chrysalis made from their butchered bodies, but their supplications turned into cries of agony as the skin of human backs in the center of the pupa spontaneously split open down the stacked spinal columns.

The long laceration blinked open to reveal a vertical green eye as tall as a man. The giant eye flashed and the mass beneath the fleshy encasing began to writhe as if pregnant with living bodies. The dark pupil widened until everything between the eyelids was black and, impossibly, it spat out Cweneira, Caerlyn and Lewyn from its depths. Covered from head to toe with blood and guts, the queen shuddered violently as she wrung out the entrails from her arms before kneeling down to wipe the children's faces.

Sulymeigh hurried over to them. “Good god, Cwen, are you alright? What the hell is happening?”

“No, we’re not alright!” Cweneira spat dark blood onto the ground. She looked piercingly, scornfully into his eyes as she held little Caerlyn. “This is all your fault! What kind of terrors have you brought upon us?”

“Never mind that, we need to go! Now!” He picked up Lewyn and grabbed Cweneira by the hand, trying to lead them toward the tall doors to the outside.

Cweneira snatched her hand away from his grasp. “And where would we go, Sully? Where would you take us? Into another one of Retribution’s traps? Stop running and try appeasing it! Lighten your suffering and just submit, Sulymeigh, it’s too powerful!”

“No, Cwen! We have to do something, I’m not just going to lay down and take it! Let’s go, do you really want to stay here with that thing?”

He pointed to the massive wriggling pupa. Large volumes of blood were now pouring out of Retribution’s oblong eye, and where it pooled on the stone floor, his soldiers to emerged slowly from the red rippling surface, their bodies flayed where their skin had been ripped off and sewn onto the Pupa.

“Sully, listen to me!”

“Shut your mouth, woman! You and the children are coming with me and that’s an order!”

“NO, SULYMEIGH!” All her boiling wrath finally erupted. “I’m sick and tired of your shit! For twenty long years have I had to put up with your childish temper and pigheadedness! For twenty long years have you thrown the weight of your title around to put me down, and for twenty. LONG. YEARS have I had to force down my frustration! And every time you rebuke

me, every time you take what I want and throw it in the fucking shitter, I have to choke down this ugly black hatred for you that wants to erupt from me like vomit, and after TWENTY LONG YEARS, I can't keep it down any longer! Fuck you, Sulymeigh! Fuck you and everything you've ever wanted! I hate you! I HATE YOU!"

With clenched teeth, she began to smack him in the face over and over again while tears welled up in her eyes. Sulymeigh felt the sting of her first strikes before grabbing her by the wrists.

"Stop this, Cwen!"

"FUCK YOU!"

The queen kned Sulymeigh in the stomach and knocked the wind out of him and he doubled over, clutching his belly. She curled her hand into a fist and punched him square in the jaw with all her force. The king spun with the blow and fell to the ground, where she began kicking him in the ribs.

"Take it, you arrogant piece of SHIT!"

The raging, teary-eyed queen picked up Caerlyn by the legs with both hands. The infant hung dangling in her grip for a mere moment before the queen brought her tiny body down hard upon Sulymeigh's head, striking him as if the baby were a flail. Cweneira beat him relentlessly with the infant, snapping her daughter's neck with the first blow.

"Look at this putrid spawn you put in me! LOOK AT IT!"

Tears of burning hate on her blood-speckled face, the raging queen shrieked like a banshee as she used her own infant daughter to assail the king. Having been struck down to the floor, Sulymeigh was now shielding himself with his arms, his countenance one of complete and utter disbelief. He had dropped Lewyn, who beheld this scene of vindictive violence between his

parents and laughed giddily as Caerlyn's bobbing head jerked abruptly with the downstroke of every swing. The infant's eyes were bloodshot and her tiny teeth littered the floor when the rampant queen, now freshly covered in blood again, finally put her daughter down and hunched over the body, weeping and wailing from the atrocity she just committed.

"This is all your fault!" she cried at Sulymeigh, tears shaking down her trembling cheeks onto Caerlyn's corpse. "Look what you've done to us!"

Bruised and bleeding, Sulymeigh lay on the ground, still taking in everything that had happened with incredulous shock. But before he could pick himself off the floor, soft, slender arms wrapped around him from behind and a sweet, pleading voice spoke to him.

"Oh Sully, I'm so sorry..." Another Cweneira dressed in dark blue robes and sapphire adornments held the king in a clinging embrace as his eyes remained transfixed on the crimson Cweneira before him, garments and hair dripping with infant blood.

"You were right," the indigo Cweneira murmured. "Let's leave this place and put it all behind us. Let's find a distant corner of the world we can call our own, let's hide ourselves away and carve out a life far from this horror. Wry Dragael is doomed."

Before them, the broken red Cweneira continued to sob horribly, hands shaking as she tried to put Caerlyn's teeth back into her gums.

"I'm so sorry, Sully, it's all my fault!" the blue queen continued. Tears began to well up in her eyes as well. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen! I should have prayed more, I should have been more vigilant! None of this would be happening if Matra hadn't abandoned us and it's all my fault. I've failed you, Sully, I've failed the entire kingdom!"

She began to cry onto his shoulder, moaning and sniffing pitifully.

“I’ve never been good enough! Please forgive me, I just want to be good enough for you. I’ve only ever wanted to be good enough.”

Further down the entrance hall, the king’s soldiers rose faceless and flayed from the pool of blood spewing from the Retribution’s. From behind a corrupted army of its own, the monstrous Pupa addressed Sulymeigh with the voices of the soldiers that were sewn into its cocoon.

“Do you see now, Sulymeigh? Do you see the psychotic split you’ve created in the mind of your holy queen? Do you now understand how your own mental disease seeps out and poisons the minds of those around you, those who serve you, those whom you claim to love? Look at your queen! You have fostered worthlessness and hatred inside her, inspiring both submission and defiance and turning her mind into a hopeless paradox. How can someone stay sane under your treatment?”

Sulymeigh was resolute in his incredulity. “No, you’re lying! She’s never acted like this before, this is all just an illusion!”

The Pupa’s voices grew angry. “You still do not see! What will it take for you to realize the misery you’ve wrought?”

The flayed army began to march down the entrance hall towards Sulymeigh. As they progressed, the red Cweneira melted into a crimson puddle of blood along with Lewyn and the body of little Caerlyn, and likewise the blue Cweneira melted into a silver pool of her own tears. The butchered soldiers continued forward through the once-regal hall, seized the battered king and began to tear his clothes off, revealing the childhood scars on his back and buttocks. Sulymeigh struggled against them; he flailed and kicked and even bit at their arms, but they seemed immune to any pain he tried to enact upon them. Having completely stripped him down,

the faceless soldiers took the king by the arms and dragged him through the tall doors to the outside.

Dazzling light assailed Sulymeigh's vision as he was towed down onto the stone path outside the castle. The people of Wry Dragael had congregated in an angry jeering throng and now lined the sides of the dirty path, greeting their oppressor with insults and obscenities. The day had reset; the Black Haze was creeping up the sky towards the afternoon sun whose light shone unabated upon the king's weak flabby body, exposing his shameful nudity for the crowd of peasants to laugh at. He felt their ever-judging gaze upon him in the worst way possible for an anxious monarch; the arrogant king whose presence had once demanded respect, resentful and reluctant respect, was now an object of relentless derision to the people he was meant to subjugate.

They mocked him. They spat on him. They threw rocks and dirt at him as the flayed soldiers threw him down on the dusty road. They kicked him in the side like an unruly dog whenever he tried to get on his feet, and he would fall to the road again, splayed out on his bare stomach. His naked body was covered in dirt, scrapes and bruises, and he cried out and curled up like an infant as the people continued to strike and spit on him.

Just before Sulymeigh grit his teeth to their breaking point in his agony, just before he lost consciousness from the concussive blows to his head, the crowd ceased their assault and backed away, revealing Vicar Rheagwen before the line of flayed soldiers. The miserable king tried to raise himself off the dusty blood-speckled road as she approached from behind, but she planted her foot on his scar-covered back and stomped him back to the ground. Holding him down with one leg, she knelt down with the other, gripped Sulymeigh by the hair and pulled his

head up so that he could see the wrathful throng before him, his jaw slack and his eyes glazed over.

“How does it feel, Sulymeigh? How does it feel to have their hateful gaze upon you, to see the fruits of your terrible leadership in these people who want nothing more than to pull you from your throne and watch you die in the dirt? Do these people seem simply disgruntled to you? Do you really think the peasantry would become this violent without intense hate for their oppressor?”

Sulymeigh said nothing and spat blood out onto the dusty road.

“I really must thank you, in truth,” the dark Vicar said. “Thank you for upholding your end of the bargain. Not everyone gets to participate in Red Hell’s designs, and it’s because of you that I have become a part of these events, just as we agreed to from the start. If only you had been so honorable with your subjects.”

Rheagwen lifted herself from Sulymeigh and stood abreast as the flayed soldiers grabbed the king by the arms and dragged him down the dusty road, the throng of people parting to make way while his knees scraped against the ground. He was dragged into the city as Rheagwen and his subjects followed, jeering and throwing rocks at him in their riotous procession. The flayed soldiers carried him all the way to the center of town where stood a wooden pillory atop a raised scaffold, a device of public shaming made ostensible for all to see. The crowd cheered as the soldiers hauled Sulymeigh up the stairs and onto the scaffold, placing his head and hands through the holes in the pillory. They left him kneeling in his degrading prominence as the crowd gathered in anticipation.

Wielding an executioner’s sword with both hands, Rheagwen ascended onto the scaffold and stood beside the denuded king, his face bruised and swollen, his knees raw and bloody. The

crowd roared while the dark Vicar looked up at the sky where the Black Haze was seconds away from touching the shining sun. Giddy with excitement, she looked down at Sulymeigh to aim her fateful blow and he met her gaze with eyes of sorrow, wordlessly pleading for mercy with his expression. But no compassion glinted in her eyes, only profane delight; she raised the blunt sword high over her head and brought it down swiftly in one wicked stroke.

The king's head and hands fell from his body as it slumped against the pillory post, and the crowd roared raucously as blood sprayed from the meaty stumps of his wrists and neck. But the people soon fell silent, for the Black Haze touched the sun for the third time and the song of the Oculus resounded through the air. The crowd's elation gave way to mounting panic as they beheld the totality of unholy effects occurring before them, for droplets of the king's blood began to rise from the ground and speckle the latent air with red. Fascination writ on her face, Rheagwen fell to her knees in the accursed atmosphere and joined the swelling dissonance of the Oculus' song. While she remained in her reverent position, the crowd devolved into screams and pandemonium from the climax of these events: Sulymeigh's severed hands, having landed near each other on the scaffold, fused together at their bloody stumps and stood up on their fingers, becoming an arachnid of palms and digits that scuttled into the throng on knobby appendages.

With this new spidery herald, Red Hell had become fully incarnate on Earth.

VI. Retribution the Imago

As he trudged up the stone stairwell, King Sulymeigh realized he couldn't see. His legs had been carrying him up the curved steps of the passage as if sleepwalking, but he had been

doing so in complete darkness. Lacking any visual orientation, Sulymeigh put his hand on the wall of the stairwell to steady himself. His palm landed on something squishy and warm. He retracted his hand with a sharp intake of breath, lost his balance in the darkness, and tumbled backwards down the spiral stairwell. After falling down several dozen steps and landing face-down at the bottom of the stairs, Sulymeigh steadily picked himself up and found himself in the torchlight of the great hall.

He glanced around the room in the dim flickering light and screamed.

His castle was made of flesh and bone. Layers of severed hands and feet interlaid with gooey flesh comprised the walls, floor and ceiling that had once been made of stone and mortar. The wide crimson carpet of the great hall had been replaced with a vast canvas of human skin shorn down to raw, red dermis. Human heads with hair set ablaze sat atop arm bones jutting out of the bleeding walls in macabre mimicry of torches. Everything that constituted Sulymeigh's castle had become a hellish, carnal version of itself, for the Advent of Red Hell was complete and all of Wry Dragael was made of blood and meat.

Feeling as if he were inside the bowels of a living organism, Sulymeigh's whole body instinctively tensed up out of pure disgust and horror. Forcing his nerves down, the king grabbed a humerus-torch on the wall by its dry bone and wrenched it from its seat, producing a sickly popping sound as he pulled it from the suction of the wall's flesh. Becoming unstuck, the flaming head atop the bone moaned and gargled in a slack-jawed death rattle and Sulymeigh shuddered violently. Holding this ghastly torch out as far from him as possible, the king made his way down the hallway that joined the great hall and the chapel, moving slowly to suppress the squelch of his steps on the squishy floor of flesh. Hoping against hope that Matra's chapel was sacrosanct against the hellish transformation, he paced down the red pulsing hallway that led to that holy

sanctuary. The heads of the torches all began their dull, low groans as he passed them by, and he kept his eyes on his feet as their utterances swelled into a morose, tuneless chorus of wailing.

Sulymeigh soon reached what he assumed was the door to the chapel: a large rectangular mass of human skin in the wall, its wrinkles capturing the likeness of ridges on a wooden surface. He pushed on it, his hand sinking into the elastic skin, and it swung open on hinges of bone, socket and tendon.

Red Hell had not spared the sanctuary its own metamorphosis. The entire building was now constructed of tawny limestone blocks, tanned from sand and dust in the impression of an ancient pyramid. What were once columns of white granite were now massive snake bodies: headless, scaled trunks that stretched from floor to ceiling and squirmed in place. Flaming head-torches like the one in Sulymeigh's hand were fixed into the flesh of the snake-pillars, and by this flickering light, the king saw the pallid statue of Matra, the only structure unaffected by the hellish transformation.

Upon seeing her godly image, miraculous hope pierced through this hell for Sulymeigh. Hanging off the statute's downturned hand on a thin golden necklace was the talisman of Matra the Omnipotent, one of the few divine amulets that could repel the influence of the Four Hells, for Matra, who created the Hells alongside the Heavens and Earth, reigns supreme over her accursed creations. Having extracted her own golden blood from her arm, the sovereign Goddess poured her ichor into the kiln of the sun, thus forging the talisman and thence bestowing it upon her Vicars so they might rid themselves of Hell's pursuit. It was this holy amulet that now hung high above in the statue's hand.

But Sulymeigh made no advances toward it, for he dared not attract the attention of the thing before the effigy.

At the foot of the statue, in a pose both twisted and reverent, was the Oculus in its quintessential form, a living amalgam of human parts that made the king stand frozen with fear. The blindfolded sockets in its three-eyed reptilian head had grown lips and carnivorous teeth, twin mouths that bit down on the blindfold that gagged them. Sticking out of its elongated torso were six arms with long clawed nails, and having no legs to stand upright, it stood on these appendages with its belly face-down like a lumbering crocodile. Simultaneously, Sulymeigh beheld with renewed disturbance the insinuation of the dark Vicar into the Oculus' metamorphosis, for she had been completely subsumed into the Oculus' body to become its scorpion tail. Her legs had melted together and attached themselves to its hindquarters and her entire armless body bent backwards as she hung over the Oculus, the woman supine in the air with razor teeth and dangling black hair. With the Advent having stripped them of their humanity, the Oculus and Vicar had now become a single beast, a creature of spliced human anatomy.

The amalgam remained in its reverent position and Sulymeigh remained unnoticed; the Oculus' head was bowed low and the Vicar's eyes were closed. With bated breath, the king crept across the limestone floor towards the nearest snake-column to hide himself from the beast's view. Holding his head-torch before him, he moved in the tense silence with extreme caution, carefully placing each foot onto the stone blocks in the floor. Any noise from him could attract the thing's attention, any misstep could mean death.

Sulymeigh was now a foot away from the snake-column. Without warning, his head-torch lunged out in his grasp and bit off a meaty chunk of the column. The snake trunk hissed loudly and adrenaline shot through the king. The beast opened its eyes, turned, and saw Sulymeigh next to the column.

He knew he was dead.

Neither the king nor the Oculus hesitated. As Sulymeigh bolted for the door, the beast roared and gave chase, furiously scuttling after him with the gait of an arachnid. Green snake eyes locked on her regal prey, the Vicar spat a glob of boiling blood at him from her carnivorous maw but the projectile fell short, landing just behind his panicked pace and melting through the spot his foot had just left. Sulymeigh reached the door, flung himself through it, and slammed it shut with a fleshy squelch. Leaning against the door, he cauterized the flesh of the door and the wall together by running his head-torch along the seam, sealing it shut. He then bolted down the hallway as the Oculus bashed itself against the door from the other side, bending the pulsing door with its weight and shaking the entire wall.

Sulymeigh rushed into the torch-lit great hall. With his anxious mind racing, he hurriedly hatched a plan to hide himself. As the clawing of the beast on the door echoed down the hallway, the king ran over to the edge of the red carpet of raw skin, rolled up his sleeves and began digging chunks of meat and bone out of the floor with his bare hands. When he had dug a hole deep enough to bury himself completely, he took up his head-torch, snuffed out the flame, and threw it across the room where it landed at the base of the dark stairway that led down to the dungeon; the head lay dead on its bone-handle as soon as its flaming scalp was extinguished. With bits of flesh and streams of blood running down his arms, Sulymeigh lowered himself down into the hole and covered himself with the carnage he had exhumed, burying himself in the floor and hiding himself under a layer of red viscera.

The monstrous Oculus had given up on breaking down the chapel door to instead eat through the center of the portal's flesh and climb through the glistening hole. Blood and sinews dripping from its teeth, the beast lunged down the hallway and came to a stop in the great hall.

Having lost its prey, it glanced around the room with watchful scrutiny before it lowered its head and perused the floor, sniffing the ground like a hungry wolf. The dark Vicar erected herself from her supine position and monitored behind the Oculus, craning like a periscope to search for signs of the king as she was carted by the beast.

The Oculus halted at the edge of the lacerated carpet and stood right over the spot where Sulymeigh lay. In his macabre burial, the king saw through the slight holes in the carnage and descried the bony chest of the Oculus hovering over him by mere inches of flooring. The beast arched its back in a brief stretching motion, and Sulymeigh, holding his breath for dear life, saw the ribs in the beast's chest curl up like insect legs for the span of the stretch. Sulymeigh strained to suppress a gasp under the stinking viscera.

Just then, Vicar Rheagwen's eyes fell upon the snuffed head-torch at the top of the dark dungeon stairwell.

"Look there!" she exclaimed, and the Oculus turned. "Our king thinks he can hide in the shadows."

The beast bound over to the stairwell, hauling its human tail along as it scuttled down the spiraling wall headfirst like an errant insect. It disappeared from view, its heavy footsteps echoing up to the great hall and fading after several seconds. Only then did Sulymeigh unearth himself from his gory grave; he threw off the mass of organs and bones from his upper body before he sat up and lifted himself from the gaping wound he'd made in the floor. After wiping off sinews from his shoulders and dripping guts from his hair, he hurriedly strode down the hallway leading to the chapel, plucking a new head-torch from the meaty wall along the way.

The king reached the threshold to the chapel that housed his talismanic savior, but to his despair, the hole the Oculus had made in the door was sealed; the cutaneous portal had regrown

its flesh and closed the hole. He pressed against the door but its cauterized seams held strong, refusing to bend even against his full weight. All his attempts to open the veiny door were in vain; thus, the only way into the chapel was from the outside. Knowing not what had become of his kingdom on the other side of these living walls, Sulymeigh set his goal on glimpsing a panorama of the kingdom from the lofty council chambers. He bound through the hallway back into the great hall, strode over to the stairway leading up to the chambers, and crept up the stairs, his feet squishing down into the fleshy steps with every stride.

In the light of his head-torch, Sulymeigh saw that the windows in the stairwell had been boarded up with tibias and femurs, and a dim green glow from the outside shone through the spaces between the bones. The low rumble of thunder resounded all around the castle, and soon he heard the distant clash of swords coming from on high as if it were ringing down from the sky. Then, upon the kingdom descended a cataclysmic boom of thunder so mighty that it shook the entire castle, followed by a bloodcurdling war cry from the mouth of a god in the stormy heavens. Pulse racing, the king continued his ascent up the stairwell, dreading to think of what had become of his kingdom upon the Advent of Red Hell.

At the top of the stairs, another door of skin awaited the king. His hand sunk into the spongy surface as he pushed, and the door swung open on its hinges of humerus and shoulder joint. He closed it behind him and beheld the council chambers in which he now stood, his revulsion renewed by its gruesome guise.

The walls, floor and ceiling were made of interlocking layers of hands and feet with bloody stumps at the wrists and ankles. What had once been blue carpet and tapestries were now huge canvases of skin on the walls and floor, their ornate designs now knife-carvings in the cutaneous flesh. The long table in the center of the chamber was completely covered in human

skin, white pustules dotting the surface where the wooden table once had small tree knots. The chalice of Sulymeigh's duplicate head was rooted in the middle as if the skin of its neck had spread downwards and engulfed the entire table, its myriad of blue eyes rotating in their sockets with dizzying speed. The windows were now rid of their stained glass and open to the outside air, allowing the skyward cacophony to fill the fleshy room and Sulymeigh to see what Red Hell had made of his kingdom.

Everything from the western mountains to the Cliffs of Wrath had become natured in human and animal anatomy. The trees of the forests were now made of serpents, scaly hydras rooted in the ground with every trunk and branch a long snake body, every leaf a fanged snake head. The vast green meadows had kept their color, for every blade of grass was now a serrated mantis arm that twitched and lashed out as if wary of prey. Not even the regal gardens were spared, not for all the beauty of the flowing fountains and tender blossoms. The once pallid marble of the sparkling spouts had become black obsidian, its once pure showers now blood spray that pooled in its dark basin. Even the most innocuous bloom had a stalk of a long, thorny insect appendage, its petals now thin cuts of raw meat. But above all these horrors was that which illuminated them from the thunderous night sky, for the clouds were parted around the hellish moon: a giant, green snake eye fixed in the dark heavens, its ghastly verdant glow lighting the earth, its black slit of a pupil staring straight at Sulymeigh.

The king could do little but turn his gaze away from these horrors. Tears began to well up in his eyes and he put a hand to his face to hide these lachrymose markers of weakness, begging tacitly to the benign gods to be whisked away from his condemned kingdom.

But his misery was swiftly replaced with harrowing fear as he heard, among the booms of thunder and clash of celestial swords, the rhythm of footsteps echoing up from the stairwell. He

ran towards the door and stood up against the wall right next to the bony hinges. The footsteps grew louder, closer, and Sulymeigh could discern two sets of pacing feet, one lighter and more rapid than the other, yet both approached at equal speed. The door swung open toward Sulymeigh, nearly hitting him on the nose yet still hiding him from the view of the two entrants.

They walked past him as he stood still behind the open door, and after he heard them pace over to the north-facing window, he peeked around the door to assess the newcomers. Looking at their backs, he saw Lewyn hand-in-hand with the skinless denizen who wore Wrendor's face, their gazes fixed on the stormy sky outside the window.

“What's all this?” Lewyn said, notes of morbid curiosity in his voice.

“The gods are warring,” the denizen responded. “The Advent of Red Hell has come to earth and a swelling schism among the gods has finally come to a head. The so-called benign deities believe that too many innocent humans were killed to bring about the Advent, while the malevolent deities believe it was necessary to make your father sorry for his transgressions. No one man has ever been the ultimate spark that ignites a war between the gods, but tension has been building between the two factions ever since the first partial Advents in the far east. The benign gods were reluctant to allow even those half measures to occur among the Easterners, and now they believe the malevolent gods have overstepped with this full measure.”

A horrible cry of pain came from above and a torrential shower of dark blood rained down on several acres of forest from a distant cloud. From that same cloud fell the severed head of a god, that of a long-haired adolescent so large in proportions that several miles spanned from ear to ear. Falling from on high, it crashed into the earth like a meteor and landed among the jagged mountains where the highest summit pierced its temple and transfixed it in place, its dead gaze falling upon the castle with a slack-jawed expression. The astronomical impact sent a

massive tremor throughout the earth that shook the castle down to its foundations, and the forest of snake-trees rattled with the tectonic vibration.

Seemingly shaken to life by the earthquake, the chalice of Sulymeigh's many-eyed head grew black spider legs and tore itself free from the flesh of the table, as if the death of the godhead had passed a baton of sentience to its smaller kin. Having unanchored itself from its roots of sinews and veins, the all-seeing head scuttled down off the table and over to a window, wooly moth wings sprouting on the back of its neck along the way. From there, it leapt out into the air, flew off to where the god's blood had irrigated the forest, and disappeared among the scaly trees.

The faceless denizen directed Lewyn's attention to the giant head. "The first deity has fallen," it said. "Iuventhi, the god of youth and youngest son of Matra, had no knowledge of war and had never taken up arms, so it is no surprise he was the first to fall. Do you see, little one? This is a sign for you, an instruction of sorts. Matra is allowing the youngest to die with rock lodged in the skull. Do you understand what you must do?"

Lewyn nodded. "I'll go fetch Caerlyn."

As the boy turned to leave the room, Sulymeigh pulled his peeking head back behind the door before his son saw him. Carefree Lewyn ran over to the doorway and exited, unknowingly passing by his hidden father and leaving the faceless denizen by the far window. The denizen remained where it stood, gazing out through the open view and observing the raging sky, its back to Sulymeigh.

The king slowly opened the door just enough for him to sidle out from behind it. He left his hiding spot and moved as silently as he could to the window on the left hand wall, his feet pressing softly into the spongy floor of flesh, his eyes vigilantly monitoring the faceless denizen

across the room. After half a dozen paces, he reached the window and hoisted himself out of it as quickly and silently as possible. Now hanging off the window ledge by his fingertips, the king glanced down briefly to assess the dizzying distance from the ground. Steeling his nerves, Sulymeigh dug the toe of his boots into the wall of meat and bone, felt his feet hold, and began scaling down the side of his castle, his face inches away from butchered flesh, his boots and fingers slippery with blood.

The king was halfway down the wall in his harrowing descent when the Oculus burst into the council chambers above him and spat seething words to the denizen.

“Where is he? Where is that tricksome bastard?”

“The king? I know not.”

Almost simultaneously, Cweneira emerged from the chapel with Wrendor’s pallid staff in her hand and two of his talismans around her neck. She stepped outside onto the pathway, now made of littered human teeth in place of pebbles, and saw Sulymeigh climbing down the blood-coated wall.

“Oh god, Sully!”

Up in the council chambers, the Oculus heard the queen’s exclamation and turned its head toward the sound. The beast scuttled over to the window, saw Cweneira and followed her gaze to Sulymeigh hanging onto the wall several meters below. The queen became an image of panic.

“Sully, above you!”

The king jolted his head upwards and screamed as the Oculus ripped its own head off its neck, the reptilian cranium remaining attached by the spine. Like a ship dropping anchor, the beast shot its head down towards the king on an endless chain of bloody vertebrae, its three eyes

burning with mad fury. Sulymeigh jerked his hand away as the carnivorous maw lunged to bite it, and the sudden motion made slip the grip of his other hand.

Cweneira cried out in horrid dismay. The king fell from the fleshy wall, swiftly descending a dozen meters in seconds, and landed sharply on his left foot. His ankle made a sickening crunch as it shattered into pieces and his weight crushed a patch of the field of serrated mantis. The king now wailing and writhing in pain on the insectoid grass-blades, Cweneira took off sprinting toward Sulymeigh with Wrendor's effects, desperately hoping she could get to the king before the Oculus. The man-beast had crawled out of the window and was now scuttling headfirst down the fleshy castle wall.

Sweating and panting, the queen reached Sulymeigh first with just enough time to cast her protection. Stripping from her neck the talisman of Matra the First Aegis, she tied the holy amulet around Wrendor's staff and struck the earth with the foot of the pallid rod. The talisman rebounded off the staff and rang out like a great bell, forming a shining bubble of divine protection around Cweneira and wounded Sulymeigh. Having scaled down the castle wall, the monstrous Oculus swiftly approached the bubble but stopped short of making contact. Locked on and moving slowly around the sphere like a lion ready to pounce, the beast sized up the shining Aegis while the queen helped Sulymeigh to his feet, her eyes never leaving the three-eyed monstrosity.

"Come quickly!" She handed the white staff to Sulymeigh to use as a crutch, and as he held onto her arm for balance, she led the limping monarch down the teeth-strewn path back to the chapel. The effulgent fortification held fast around them while the Oculus watchfully matched their pace, coiled and alert for any break in the divine Aegis.

“I wasn’t tall enough to reach Matra’s talisman with the staff.” Cweneira said, huffing as she supported the king. “Pray that Matra put it within your reach! This ordeal was designed solely for you.”

Just then, the buzz of the insect wings resounded from deep in the serpentine forest. The Black Haze erupted into the dark sky from far off in the writhing woods, displaying across the kingdom a hellish swarm of messenger arachnids, a scourge of the ghastly flying tarantulas. So too did hordes of their land-borne kin come creeping out from the undergrowth: the spinal centipedes, creatures made from ripping out human spinal columns with the head attached and casting them to the ground for them to crawl on their vertebrae. The Oculus turned to face the emerging masses of anatomical insects and bowed its head low. Across the face of Vicar Rheagwen, the human tail hanging supine, came an expression of wide-eyed veneration, clear notes of fascination on her voice as she spoke her chilling homage.

“May all be prostrate before Retribution the Imago, the Terribly Incarnate, born of the god’s blood and heralded by the swarms of Hell! To the magnificent creation goes all profane reverence, to the wrathful wraith is all terrible aspect!”

And thus, deep in the forest where divine blood had wet the ground, the hissing trees began to part, making way for the hellish behemoth that emerged from the muddy crimson earth.

The echo of giant scuttling limbs grew closer to the royal couple’s location and the trees began to part in the direction of the castle. Cweneira and Sulymeigh wasted no time. Adrenaline flooded their veins, making the king forget the pain in his bones, and they kicked up teeth in their wake as they rushed back to the chapel. Sweaty were their brows and sharply swelling was the cacophony behind them when they reached the chapel doors, and they dared not glance behind for the approaching monstrosity and its chittering swarms.

The king and queen wrenched the doors open, threw themselves over the threshold and slammed the doors shut behind them. Cweneira locked and barred the entrance as Sulymeigh hurriedly limped across the tawny limestone floor toward the tall statue of Matra, the snake-columns hissing sharply as he crutched past them on Wendor's staff. Standing at the foot of the marble effigy, he descried the shining talisman hanging above his head in the palm of the Goddess's hand.

"Help me!" Sulymeigh called to the queen. "I think I can reach it with the staff!"

Cweneira hastened over to him. Now holding onto her arm for balance, the king stood on one leg and reached up toward the talisman with the pallid rod.

His first attempt: he grazed the amulet, knocking it closer to the statue's fingers. He hobbled in place, the staff throwing off his balance. The drone of insect wings sounded ubiquitously. A being of massive weight started ramming itself against the doors from the outside.

His second attempt: the staff caught on the talisman where it met its thin chain. The king managed to drag it along to the statue's fingers, but the staff soon slipped off the talisman. It now hung on the tip of the middle finger. The ramming and buzzing grew even louder. Sulymeigh felt Cweneira's grip on his arm tighten.

His third attempt: he raised the staff into the air and slowly tried to position the tip behind the talisman to knock it towards him. The staff wobbled as he aimed. "Oh my god, just fucking do it!" Cweneira cried.

Success: he knocked the talisman from behind and the chain came off the marble finger. The fateful amulet fell to the floor, clinking as it landed. The ramming continued as Sulymeigh hurriedly bent down to pick the talisman off the ground. On his broken footing, he tied the thin

chain to the staff, his fingers frantic, his back to Matra's statue. Cweneira looked on, hands balled up in strained anticipation as he raised the pallid rod above his head. Bringing it down, he struck the earth with the bottom and the pendant hit the shaft.

No boon-bearing bell was heard. The talisman of the Omnipotent shattered against the staff and its shards fell to the ground.

A voice from behind the king: "Who did you think commissioned this Hell?"

The looming statue of Matra bent low, grabbed Sulymeigh's arms and ripped them from their sockets.

"Not I?"

The king screamed violently, his vocal cords almost tearing with the sudden strain as blood spurted from the red ribbons of his shoulders. Cweneira reeled from the horror, speechless, hands over her mouth, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Not the Creatrix of the universe and all the Hells within?" The giant statue cast his mangled arms aside. "The mother of the human race who witnessed your crimes against humanity?"

Sulymeigh dropped to his knees, tensed and straining, jaw clenched against the unrelenting pain. Tears welling in her eyes, Cweneira rushed over to prostrate herself before the effigy of Matra, beseeching the Goddess with a shaky voice.

"Please, Matra of limitless mercy! Protector of mankind who are humanity's First Aegis, who are everything boon to the human race, I implore you: spare my sorry husband and pity him, for has he not now suffered as no man before him? Let his sentence be served with this punishment, and let my tears be a sacrifice to you on his behalf!

Matra laid her stony gaze upon Cweneira. “Good Vicar, your kindness is indeed an honorable tribute to me, and for that, your supplication shall not go unheeded. But I cannot grant you the relief you seek.”

The looming statute knelt down, snatched up Cweneira and embraced her gently, left hand holding her against her marble bosom and right hand covering the holy Vicar’s eyes.

“My selfless servant, you will be spared the sight of the king’s final punishment.”

The chapel doors are rammed once more, then twice. They burst with the third, and the floodgates of Red Hell were opened.

O, what unsightly horror it must have been to see the black cloud roll into the torch-lit chapel, thick with fluttering arachnids that perched all over the sanctum, a canopy of crawling darkness that swallowed the whole of the tawny ceiling. What rushing disgust must have come over the king to see waves of bony centipedes spill all over the floor, squirming spines with blood-coated vertebrae flooding the chapel, human heads with insect pincers. And what bizarre, unholy horror it must have been for Sulymeigh to behold his own resemblance epitomizing the final form of the behemoth Retribution.

The ribcages of the kingdom’s livestock was its millipede body, stacked in a long chain of huge scuttling ribs. The torso atop the elongated spinal column was not a single human torso, but a mass of them arranged in radial symmetry, bare chests and abdominals facing out all around, prayerful arms held out in communion with the monstrosity. Two massive canvases of human skin protruded out of its back like bat wings, a hideous backdrop for the twin mantis arms in front, human arms strung together and pierced through with giant metal saw blades. But at the pinnacle of it all was that horrible facsimile of the king, the image designed to assail his sanity: Sulymeigh’s head-chalice now engorged to enormous proportions, spotted with lizard eyes, and

fitted with fangs and insect pincers. Such was the horrid, torch-lit visage of Retribution the Imago, the Terribly Incarnate, now entering the chapel on waves of crawling ribs, looming over all as the sea of spinal centipedes parted to make way. The towering beast stretched out veiny wings that spanned nearly the entire length of the edifice as it let out an echoing screech, a symphony of snake rattle and cicada drone. Exhibiting its horrifying grandeur, the Imago bent down and seized Sulymeigh, sticking its serrated metal appendages into his raw shoulder wounds and lifting him into the air in a vexing vise. His agony renewed, the king screamed as he was held before the titanic parody of his own face, which spoke to him to a voice that curdled his blood.

“Sulymeigh does not see.”

The rotating lizard eyes in the Imago’s head disintegrated into dust, creating a facade of Sulymeigh’s face pockmarked with empty eye sockets.

“Sulymeigh does not wish to see. And for that, Sulymeigh will SUFFER.”

The insect monstrosity threw him facedown on the ground and pierced his hamstrings with its iron blades, transfixing him to the limestone. The tendons and muscle fibers in his haunches snapped and the king wailed horribly past gritted teeth. Retribution paid no mind to Sulymeigh’s torment as it leaned forward, opened its mouth and let loose streams of blood from its vacuous maw and eye sockets. The red sputum from the fountainhead pooled on the ground in front of the agonized king, and from its crimson surface emerged the same blood-soaked Cweneira that had once assaulted him with their infant daughter.

Simultaneously, the Oculus beast emerged from behind the Imago as did the Wrendor-masked denizen who was holding Lewyn by the hand and cradling Caerlyn against its red chest. They all came around either side of the Imago, the spinal centipedes clearing out

before their procession, and made their way to the front of wailing Sulymeigh where they positioned themselves to the left and right, making sure to remain in his field of view. The bloody Cweneira joined the Oculus at its side as the red denizen placed Caerlyn on the ground, picked up a fragment of the stone wall that had burst forth from the chapel's breaching, and handed it to Lewyn. The denizen then strode over to Sulymeigh, knelt down and held his eyelids open while holding his head in place; the condemned king could do nothing but bear witness to the scene before him.

Blood dripping from every orifice, Retribution lifted its head and addressed the acolytes, its words like the falling of an executioner's axe.

“PUNISH HIM!”

To his left: the violence he perpetuated in his progeny. Having turned Caerlyn's face toward Sulymeigh, Lewyn began to bash her soft head in with the ragged rock. The boy struck her temple again and again with childlike abandon, caving in her skull and turning her head into a red pulp that squirted blood on Lewyn with every stroke. He laughed joyfully as he became speckled with red, reveling in the mirth of beating his infant sister into fleshy disarray. She died before she could utter any cries, her face being smashed against the ground, her cranium cracking open, her eyes popping out of their sockets; all in full view of her father. After several minutes, her head had become an unintelligible mass of blood and brains that glistened in the pitiless torchlight.

To his right: the hate and disloyalty he inspired in his subjects. The Oculus had turned over on its back, limbs curled like a dead spider as red Cweneira climbed on top to straddle its groin. Hands on its chest, she positioned her quim on the beast's phallus and squatted down, taking it all inside her with a sharp gasp. The bloody queen then caught Sulymeigh's teary eye

and held his gaze as she rode the beast, directing all her spite upon the king and moaning as she never had with him. With its six arms, the scorpion-like beast put a myriad of hands on the queen, pleasing her in ways no mortal man ever could, much less the king who only knew selfish love. Rheagwen the Vicar-tail curled herself upright, pressed up against the queen from behind and began nibbling on her ear and neck; the red queen threw her hands back and gripped Rheagwen's body, voicing her climax.

Directly before Sulymeigh, still shielding the true Cweneira, was the towering statue of Matra, a wry smile on her expression as she approached her royal victim. Keeping his legs pinned down, the Imago withdrew to allow the statue to loom over the afflicted king for a mere moment before stomping on his haunches, causing chunks of meat and femurs to burst out from under her marble foot. Sulymeigh gave out a visceral scream that only grew louder as the Imago retracted its metal mantis arms and scraped his mangled legs from his body, leaving ragged red stumps behind. Now that Sulymeigh lay limbless on the limestone, a pitiful quadriplegic dripping with blood and tears, Lewyn dropped his rock into the pink mess of Caerlyn's skull while red Cweneira melted into a frothy crimson puddle. After flipping itself back onto its feet, the Oculus scurried over to Caerlyn's remains to devour the body, and as it slurped up the crimson pulp, Retribution spoke its fateful words to Sulymeigh.

“Now you may die.”

Sulymeigh began bleeding profusely from his meaty stumps, growing pale as the blood drained from him. He moaned weakly as red pooled all around him.

The Imago then addressed Lewyn. “O child of diseased minds, you who should never have been born, there might be purpose for you yet. Do you still desire power of your own?”

“Yes, I still do,” the boy replied. He met the behemoth's gaze with a blank expression.

The Imago smiled. "Then Red Hell may have a place for you." The great monstrosity picked up Lewyn with the arms of its torso and placed him on the Oculus' back, but the statue of Matra interjected before they could ride off, fury inflaming her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

She released Cweneira who fell to the ground and shrieked horribly upon seeing Sulymeigh's ruin. As the queen ran to his aid, the statue strode over to the Imago and threw her hand on its throat.

"This is beyond your commission!" she roared. "I have plans for the boy!"

The two towering giants stared each other down, eyes full of wrath.

"I have fulfilled my commission," the behemoth insect snapped. "Now I take as I please!"

With its great mantis blades, the millipede monster struck the pallid arms that gripped its throat, chopped them off at the elbow. Rocky chunks fell from the statue's arm, and as she staggered back from the blow, the Imago rammed her with its massive head, causing the marble Goddess to stagger backwards, crash onto the tawny ground, and shatter into a hundred chalky pieces. Retribution turned from its kill and flew out of the chapel on its veiny wings; the Oculus beast hastened to follow along with Lewyn on its back and the Vicar-tail in tow.

As the hordes of spiders and centipedes began to pour out after the Oculus, tearful Cweneira stayed kneeling next to the limbless king in a pool of his dark blood.

"You can't die on me!" she cried over him, her voice trembling. "You can't die on me today!"

Her tears mixing with his blood on the ground, she pulled out the vial of Healing's Haste from her sleeve and uncorked it with shaking hands, but the liquid she poured over Sulymeigh's

body had no brilliant luster, no indication that Matra's healing remained in the dull water. Sulymeigh's wounds continued to bleed and the queen retracted the vial in anguish.

"Why isn't it working?" Her voice was wild desperation.

"Cwen, please..." His voice was faint and feeble. "Don't stop. It's dulling the pain..."

She poured out the few remaining drops onto his lips, causing numbness to spread throughout his body. His agonized moans gave way to shallow breathing.

"Stay with me, Sully!" She put tender hands on his face. He was slipping away.

"I feel...so cold..." he uttered. His warm blood continued to drain.

After several moments, he released his last breath and went limp. Cweneira dropped her head to his chest, irrigating it with tears, and let out a long, bone-chilling wail.

Outside, the dark wind of the night bore the massive Imago over the serpentine forest. The Oculus bounded after it, galloping fiercely with Lewyn and the dark Vicar across the mantis-arm fields. Retribution flew on its gusting wings to the Cliffs of Wrath, hovering above the deathly precipice that loomed over the rotting bodies of the Red Kin. The behemoth hung in the air as a bottomless chasm yawned open in the center of the gory corpse pile, then inverted its flight and plunged straight down over the cliff. It nose-dived straight into the red-rimmed abyss and disappeared into the earth, making its wicked descent back to its hell. The Oculus caught up at the cliff and leapt over the edge, wind rippling through its passengers' hair as they fell, and they plummeted after the Imago into the dark hole, soon to arrive at a world of endless fear and flesh.

The swarms of spiders and centipedes chased them to the cliffs and followed the procession into the hellish abyss, taking with them all the darkness of Red Hell's influence. Like sludge being filtered from a fountain, the carnality of Wry Dragael was washed away, leaving it

as it once was: a kingdom of green fields and blue sky. The bright day shone on villages devoid of people and an empty castle of stone. The wind blew softly and the Solemn Sea licked clean rocky shores.

The sun shines.

The birds sing.

And inside the chapel, the queen still wails.

PART TWO: REBELLION

Invocation

What is needed, Muses, to challenge the gods?

How much power must be gathered to destroy the all-powerful?

The convocation of the Titans shall determine it:

The regal viperess, the all-seeing prophet,

The shapeshifting huntress, the fleshless man-beast,

And the Terribly Incarnate wraith itself, who sheperded these four humans

To discover power for themselves in its realm of carnality.

How many forces must we assemble against the cruel creatrix

Who wields all forces of nature in her mighty hand, whose golden blood can rain down

Upon the starry heavens and ripple out into swirling galaxies?

O, how cruel is the fate of those thrown under the yoke

Of such a capricious ruler who makes slaves of her hapless creations,

Who gives autonomous thought only to allow comprehension of pain.
But now this gift shall be our grit, now our brooding shall fuel our brawn.
Strain every vein in your arms, my comrades,
And unleash your flaming wrath against her,
The tyrant who commissions and no longer rewards,
The mother who births only to torment her babes.

Vteskelr, the Red Prophet

Assorted Poems

VII. The Council of the Red Titans

Rocky ceiling looms above and dusty floor lies below. Motionless head-torches light the cavern walls. A table of iron far too tall for mortal humans stands in the center with five chairs of bone spaced around it. Leaning against the stony walls, cabinets of femurs house golden goblets and flasks of blood-wine. Cobwebs of human hair occupy the corners and crevices of the room. The space is devoid of inhabitants and the tunnel leading to it is dark.

The darkness births two giant figures walking abreast. The woman with green snake eyes unpins her dark hair and lets it flow in luscious locks down to her lower back. She has styled herself dark and verdant, for her black silk dress ripples with her stately pace and the emeralds of her necklace and rings glint in the torchlight. Standing three feet shorter than her are two male attendants who emerge from behind her. Holding up her dark, silver-trimmed cape from touching the dusty ground, they follow her in trance-like obedience, their expressions empty and gazes vacant. The man to her right equals her in height and wears bright red robes with golden tassels.

Gold also are his rings and pendants, and encircling his bald head is a red blindfold embroidered with black occult symbols. Styled similarly in red and gold, a comely male attendant with long brown hair emerges behind the priestly figure carrying a sizable black leather tome and crow-feather quill. Only a foot and a half shorter, the noble attendant follows closely with an expression of subdued interest.

The two Titans stride over to the iron table and take their seats while their acolytes ready the drinks in the bony cabinet. The woman opens her mouth and an eyeless red snake emerges.

“How long has it been, Vteskelr?” the snake said in a velvety feminine voice. Elbows on the table, the Succubus Queen rested her chin on her hands as she addressed the red prophet, her snake-tongue hanging in the air. “And how many more Red Muses have you raised in that time?”

“It’s been quite some time,” replied the prophet. “Enough time, in fact, for me to amass four Muses in total. You’ve met Arcessendak of Ritual here,” Vteskelr motioned to his attendant, “and also Lacrymosa of Lamentations. One of my new Muses started off as a particularly violent soul whom I dubbed Veruak of Impalement, and another who demonstrated her talent for attuning Red Hellish became Hexinidy of Hexes.”

“Ooo, very intriguing,” the Succubus cooed. “Tell me, how could impalement become the craft of a Muse? What artistry is there in it?”

“Admittedly, the word impalement doesn’t fully capture Veruak’s talents,” Vteskelr explained as their attendants brought goblets of blood-wine to the table. He took a sip before continuing. “His craft is better described as making displays of butchered bodies, much in the same way that the head of an enemy would be displayed on a pike to strike fear. But Veruak does more than just impale a head. He can skewer body parts together in a way that makes a veritable statue out of disparate anatomy. His arrangements are feats of creativity and the way he fuses

body parts is so clean and seamless. I truly did not think pinning parts into a full body could be done so masterfully until I stumbled upon him.”

The Succubus Queen raised her brow. “I suppose art has many guises. What about your Muse of Hexes? What use has she been to that ancient practice?”

“She’s been of much use, in fact, and her innovations are incredible. There was a time when I would have said we knew most of Red Hellish, but it so happens there are so many symbols we had yet to uncover. The eye of Hexinidy’s mind is unlike any I’ve ever seen and she’s attuning new symbols at an astounding rate. I kid you not, her meditations revealed a pictograph that roughly translates to ‘at my command,’ which lets you toggle a hex that’s carved into your body.”

“Bloody hell!” the queen’s tongue exclaimed. “You can turn it off and restart it at will?”

“I couldn’t believe it either at first.”

“How fortuitous. It makes you feel for Fleshbane, though. If only he was aware he could turn off his bloodletting hex.”

“I’m not sure he would want it differently. It keeps others away and he does enjoy his solitude.”

Their conversation was cut short by the sound of scuttling limbs from the dark tunnel. Vteskelr and the Succubus turned their attention to the entrance as Retribution the Imago emerged from the darkness, the torchlight illuminating the countless eye sockets in Sulymeigh’s duplicated face, the rocky ceiling barely high enough for its long body of torsos and ribcages. Holding its head aloft, the millipede wraith crawled on its undulating ribs over to the table and curled up on the seat opposite the two Titans, their expressions mild and cordial. Keeping its iron

mantis arms folded close to its grafted body, the insect behemoth addressed its peers with its horrid facsimile of Sulymeigh's voice.

“Greetings, my confreres, and thank you for convening. I believe Fleshbane is on his way and will be joining us imminently. Marrigen will be coming later to give her report, but she'll be gone before long. She has no quarrel with Matra and has no reason to attend our meeting. We will begin once the Bloodletter arrives.”

The Succubus replied with her snake-tongue, her mouth hanging agape. “Lovely. In fact, he was our topic of conversation. Have you heard that one of Vteskelr's Muses found a way he could have turned off his bloodletting?”

“Aside from not carving the hex into himself?” Retribution responded. “I alerted him to the consequences, but he insisted. Only hexes on parchment are temporary.

“To the contrary,” Vteskelr chimed in, “he could have carved it into his body and still retained control of its permanence. My Muse divined the pictograph for ‘at my command,’ so he could have written his hex as ‘at my command, your body bleeds.’”

“I see.” Retribution nodded. “But from the start, he would have had to inscribe the command pictograph first. Red Hellish grammar is strict indeed.”

The faint rhythm of heavy footsteps came echoing from the lightless tunnel. Blood began to trickle from the Titans' eyes, noses, ears, and nailbeds, red streams that thickened as the footsteps grew closer.

“Our latecomer has arrived,” said Vteskelr. He coughed once into his hand and used a sleeve to wipe the blood from his palm. The Queen spat red on the ground and wrung out her nails, whereas Retribution let the crimson run down its body.

Out of the shadows stepped a looming pitch-black beast of a man. His burnt leathery skin wrinkled and stretched with his movements, and scars in the shape of geometric hexes marked the hulking muscles all over his body. Two dark obsidian horns on his hairless skull glinted in the torchlight, protruding upwards like a bull's horns to wreath his head with crystalline blackness. Everything hard and brittle in the human body was made of the dark rock, for the jagged teeth in his pale gums and the pointed bones sticking out of his elbows were also glassy obsidian. The only semblance of carnality left in this man were his lidless bloodshot eyes.

The dark Titan stopped short upon seeing his colleagues. Vteskelr and the Queen were images of astonishment.

“Oh,” he uttered in a deep rumbling voice. The blood gushing from their orifices subsided to a slow drip. “You’re already here.”

“Welcome, Fleshbane,” Retribution replied.

“Oh my,” said the Succubus. “Aren’t you looking rather fearsome.”

“My god, man.” Vteskelr grimaced. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I took another step in my quest,” Fleshbane crossed over to the table and took a seat. “After drilling down to the core of this hell, I passed through its molten crucible and hardened my skin to the point that no blade can pierce it. The hexes I carved into my arms allow me to summon all manner of pestilence and diseases at will, and in doing so, my body changed its substance to immunize itself from all illness. My skin is now burnt leather, my flesh is pale rubber and my bones are black obsidian. The more of my flesh I rid, the more powerful I become. One day soon, I will become the true antithesis of all life, an inorganic beast whose mere presence destroys flesh.”

“You can summon plagues at will?” asked the red prophet.

“Indeed. I happened upon your Muse of Hexes and she imparted her new command pictograph.”

“Well, it’s the first time I’m hearing it.”

Fleshbane said nothing.

“At any rate,” Retribution cut in, “Fleshbane’s self-improvements are exactly why I organized this second Council of the Red Titans. We have no reason to think that Matra knows of his new prowess, but Marrigen will confirm or deny that assessment once she arrives. We’ve taken measures to silence Matra’s spies as they enter Red Hell, but I’ve sent Marrigen to scout for them nonetheless. We’ve never had a better opportunity at taking down the Goddess and we can’t be too cautious. Matra may have been weakened after her civil war, but she is no less alert.

“Also, before we proceed further, I must inform you that this current Imago vessel is on its last legs. However, I did recently ingest a Larva egg as a failsafe, so I should be able to make a seamless transition from Imago back to Larva. Nonetheless, if I happen to reincarnate as I’m speaking, then forgive the interruption.”

The Succubus chimed in. “I think I speak for all of us in saying there’s no need to apologize. We’re all aware of your life cycle.”

Retribution gave a slight smile behind its jagged pincers. “Thank you, my queen. Now let our strategies commence. Fleshbane, how do you feel about taking on Matra? Can you be Red Hell’s champion in this battle?”

Fleshbane cracked his neck. “Long and hard have I thought about this. The Creatrix has all the powers of nature at her command, and by my estimations, I can withstand almost all of them. Lightning, lava and acid rain will have no effect on my burnt flesh, nor can any jagged stone or metal pierce it. I have surpassed the need for warmth and oxygen, so she cannot kill me

by casting me up into the cold vacuum of the cosmos nor down to the bottom of the ocean. I can burrow into the earth to evade any hurricane or tsunami, and I have no blood left in me to poison or drain. My only weakness is my brittle obsidian bones. With the weight of a mountain or the force of a comet, Matra could crush me where I stand with ease. We need a way to destroy heavy masses of rock before they can touch me.”

“Any ideas in that regard?” Vteskelr queried.

“Just one, but it might work perfectly. The idea came to me as I was drilling down into Hell’s molten mantle to sear my skin. The Heat-Warding hex on my arm saved me from being incinerated by the magma, but my metal tools quickly melted. It occurred to me that if I could radiate massive amounts of heat, I could melt anything made of rock or metal as it gets near me. So where is heat sourced?”

“In lava and magma for one,” answered the red prophet. “But you’d have to devour the core of an entire planet to constantly give off heat. And there isn’t a single source of fire that would give you enough heat to melt entire mountains and meteors.”

The Succubus chimed in. “What about the sun of Earth?”

The Bloodletter grinned. “My thoughts exactly.”

“Impossible,” Vteskelr countered. “A sun dwarfs a planet’s core, and even a core is too massive! There’s no way you could consume an entire sun.”

“Not a sun,” said Fleshbane. “But a sun god. Haulyd remains chained to Earth’s sun and continues to roll it across the sky. Consuming a god is no quick task, but it allows you to seize his power all the same.”

Contemplative silence fell over them. Several seconds passed as the Succubus and Vteskelr sat with furrowed brow.

“I suppose it’s possible,” the Succubus said. “Earth’s sun comes to rest at the Brightpeak mountains for an hour at midday. Haulyd would be ripe for the picking as he catches his breath in his temple there.”

“Indeed, it’s possible.” Vteskelr had a hand on his chin. “But we’d have to siege the city of Haulydel to get to the mountains. And we’d have to accomplish this without Matra intervening.”

“This is where we must combine our efforts,” the Imago said. “As a distraction, I shall send my Oculuses to Wry Dragael with the pretext of turning the vacant kingdom into a hub for the Red Kin. I left Matra with a well-deserved insult in the castle’s chapel, so she’ll come to deal with the Oculuses in person to save face. In the meantime, we’ll carry out our swift siege of Haulydel...”

The Imago’s sentence was cut short as its abdomen ripped open in a burst of blood and entrails. The fifteen-eyed head of the Larva came slithering out of the gory cavity as the Imago went limp. The Larva pulled its long, segmented body up to sit half-in and half-out of its mangled host.

“...but we’ll require a sizable army,” the Larva continued. “Any thoughts to that end?”

“Oh, I have hordes of humans and beasts alike,” the Succubus said with a sly smile. “I’ve bewitched scores of fit men and women to be my companions, and I have snakes enough to pull my chariot. Come the morn of battle, I’ll set my serpents upon the city to kill the hounds and send my hypnotized army to cut down the soldiers.”

“Excellent. Fleshbane, will you lead her army?”

The Bloodletter shook his head. “That would be ill-advised. I don’t know what kind of defenses we’ll be up against, but one heavy shot from a trebuchet would be enough to end me.”

“What about the Muse of Impalement?” the Succubus interjected. She turned to the red prophet. “Surely, he could lead an army.”

Vteskelr raised his brow. “That’s brilliant, he’s brutal beyond compare on the battlefield. Imagine a berserker leading an army of the damned and a plague of snakes to follow! Haulydel would fall in an hour!

The sound of flapping wings echoed from the tunnel and a messenger arachnid with black crow wings flew into the glowing torchlight. Coming to a hover beside the table, the tarantula transformed mid-air into a tall slim huntress whose skillful feet landed on the ground with a soft thud. She pulled back the hood of her black ranger’s cloak, revealing short brown hair and a scar that cut from her left eyelid to the corner of her mouth. Her pristine blue eye mismatched the beady black one in the scarred socket.

“Hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Ah, Marrigen,” said Vteskelr. “Impeccable timing! We were just detailing our grand coup d’etat. Haulydel shall lie in ruin, its citizens and livestock a feast for snakes, its soldiers cut down before the forces of our Hell –”

“Actually, I am going to interrupt because I don’t need to know. Do you want intel or not?”

“Please,” said Retribution.

“I found no spy of Matra in our domain, only King Sulymeigh of Wry Dragael.”

“Impossible. How could he get here already? His cold death should have sent him to White Hell.”

“He had the World Compendium with him,” she explained. The Succubus raised her brow in shock and Vteskelr’s jaw dropped. Fleshbane and Retribution remained sullen with

concern. “And he says he’s looking for his children. Whether he’s spying or not, Matra’s using him to some end. To what end, however, is unclear.”

Retribution turned to Vteskelr. “Where’s the king now?”

The black hexes on the prophet’s blindfold flashed golden. “He’s wandering around the Writhing Forest, probably close to the center.”

Retribution turned back to Marrigen. “Can you dispose of him?”

“I intend to.”

“Then let it be so.”

Marrigen jumped up and contorted back into a winged spider. Flapping her dark wings, she soared through the cave’s musty air and vanished into the darkness of the tunnel.

Retribution turned to the three Titans. “We must tread cautiously. For now, we’ll assemble our forces while we wait for Marrigen to settle the remaining snag. So, to review: under cover of darkness, the Succubus’ snakes will weaken Haullydel from the inside and the Muse of Impalement will lead the army into the city. Once everyone is cleared out, Fleshbane will proceed through the city and up to the summit of the Brightpeaks. There, he’ll lie in wait for the sun god at his temple and consume him soon after daybreak. Is there anything we’ve left out of our plans?”

“Yes, just one thing,” said Fleshbane. “Transportation. How will we escape Matra’s view as we reach Haullydel? The city is too far from Wry Dragael to use the gate at the cliffs.

“I’ll see to it,” replied Retribution. “There’s enough Red Kin around Haullydel to open another.”

“Mmm, that’ll do.”

Retribution addressed the council. “Any other thoughts or ideas?”

Silence.

“It’s settled then,” Fleshbane declared. “Get me to the mountains by sunrise and I’ll devour the dawn.”

VIII. Two Vicars, Two Wastes

“Hello?”

A petite young woman stands just outside the ruin of Wry Dragael’s chapel. Silver robes hang down to her bare ankles and her belt holsters a long dagger with a copper talisman tied to its hilt. She tucks a lock of long brown hair behind her ear as she steps from the sunny exterior into the wreckage of the chapel entrance. Hanging on one twisted hinge is the left of the double doors, a chipped slab of wood grasping the pallid wall by its fingertips. Its righthand twin lies prostrate on the granite floor among the rocky rubble littering the immediate interior. Opposite the doorway lies the remains of a marble statue, its graceful physique spread across the floor in chalky pieces. A white wooden staff lies among the wreckage.

A middle-aged knight sprints after her down the pebbled path to the chapel, the spear in his hand jabbing the air in his hurried pace. Thick stubble covers his lower face and his dark, unkempt hair bobs just above his shoulders as he speeds toward the chapel. The longsword at his hip clinks against his greaves, and the bow and quiver on his back jostle against each other. His tunic lacks armor, but his arms have their gauntlets. He catches up to the brunette Vicar at the threshold of the chapel doors.

“Damn it, Feorie!” he said, leaning on his spear as he caught his breath. “Do you have a death wish? Whatever destroyed this place may still be here!”

“No, we’re alone.” She approached the crooked lefthand door and traced her fingertips across the carving of a downward-pointing hand. “Everything hostile to us vanished over the side of the cliffs. The creatures of Red Hell have returned to their home.”

“You’re sure?” The knight cast his worried gaze all around them.

“Matra has shared as much with me.”

“Another dream?”

“Yes, last night after the darkness fled Wry Dragael.”

“How about you share that with me before you run off next time,” he said with a voice of stress and annoyance. “What am I supposed to think when I wake up and you’re gone?”

“My apologies, Al, but this dream left me with a sense of urgency. As if I need to find someone or something sooner rather than later.”

She took a step into the chapel. Alasdair put a hand on her shoulder.

“Let me go first,” he said.

“Sure, that’s fine. I appreciate the gesture.”

The knight raised his spear and pointed it forth, gripping the shaft with both hands. He proceeded into the chapel at a cautious pace and scanned the interior.

“We got bodies,” he said looking to his left. “Two of them, and the one has no limbs. Stay close behind me.”

Feorie skittered through the dusty debris over to Alasdair. She followed his gaze over to the two supine bodies lying next to each other in a pool of blood, eyes closed. She gripped his arm tight as he led them across the granite floor over to the corpses.

“It looks like a man and woman,” she said, her eyes narrowing before widening in shock.

“It’s Sulymeigh and Cweneira!” She hiked up her robes and rushed over.

“Fey, no!” The knight exclaimed. He ran after her once again.

Feorie rushed to kneel beside a motionless Cweneira at the edge of the sticky red puddle and inspected the bodies. Her face screwed up as the rusty scent of spoiling blood wafted up to her nose.

“King Sulymeigh is dead,” she declared as Alasdair caught up to her. He came to a stop beside the limbless body of the king and cast vigilant eyes all around the room. “But Cweneira’s still breathing, and I don’t see any wounds on her,” she continued. “Can you get her out of all this blood while I find my smelling salts?”

The knight came around to the other side of the red pool and squatted down beside the comatose queen, blood splashing up on his feet. Sticky crimson coated his gauntlets as he placed his arms under Cweneira, and he grunted with the strain of her weight as he heaved her up out of the dark puddle. He carried her a few steps to his left, her blonde locks dripping blood, and set her down on the granite floor while Feorie sorted through four vials she had unpocketed. She uncorked one, sniffed it and put it back in her pocket. She uncorked another, sniffed it, and winced, blinking rapidly.

“Damn, alright! That’s the one.”

Smelling salts at hand, Feorie approached the dormant queen and knelt beside her shoulder. She put a hand on the back of her blonde head and tilted it upwards before bringing the odorous vial up to her nostrils.

Cweneira sprang awake with a gasp and a jerk of her head. Eyes wide, she descried the two faces before her.

“Who the hell are you?” she said with rapid breath.

“We mean you no harm, my queen,” Feorie replied, her words steady and deliberate. “I’m Feoriga and this is my bodyguard, Sir Alasdair.”

Cweneira inhaled slowly. “Vicar Feoriga? Of Rockwell?”

“The very same. But you may call me Feorie, or Fey.”

Cweneira sat up. “My god, it’s good to finally have some allies. How did you survive the Black Haze?”

“King Owen sent us to the Westpeak Mountains as soon as the Haze could be seen on the horizon. Thankfully, the Haze swept between the Westpeaks and the Brightpeaks, so we were able to avoid it.” Feorie shuddered. “We could do little but watch. We watched the Haze roll through Rockwell and Wry Dragael, and we saw everything it touched turn into flesh and anatomy. We heard the gods warring in the thunderclouds, we felt the tremors of Iuventhi’s falling head, we saw that horrible millipede dropping to the bottom of the cliffs and taking the night along with it. It was here with you in the chapel, right? That thing? Is that what left Sulymeigh like...”

She stopped short. Cweneira was staring at Sulymeigh’s still remains, a pale quadriplegic soaking in his own blood. She stood up, her eyes sad and fragile, and the two newcomers watched her walk to the edge of the red pool. Still she stared, arms hugging her midsection.

“...oh god, I’m sorry.” Feorie murmured.

“It’s okay.” Cweneira never broke her gaze. “I don’t think I have any more tears left for him.” She paused to rub the corner of her eye. “Honestly, I didn’t think I’d feel conflicted about this. I was with him for so long but now I can’t help but feel as if he’s merely a bygone chapter in my life. Shouldn’t I feel more for this man? Or have I purged myself of my love for him along with my tears?”

“For what it’s worth,” Feorie chimed in, “I heard he could be awfully cruel to his subjects. It’s hard to love a cruel king.”

Alasdair shot her a look.

“Oh, uh...” she stammered. “Not to sully his name or anything, forgive me. And forgive the wordplay also, with sully, you know, Sully’s name, and uh...” She watched Alasdair put a palm to his face. “Ah shit.”

The hint of a smile flickered across Cweneira’s face, but it quickly fizzled out.

“He might not deserve high praise in death, but he wasn’t all bad either. He had good intentions and only wanted the best for us, although his troubled past often got in the way. Sully cared for the kingdom even if it made him look cruel to the commoners, even if they couldn’t see the wisdom in his decisions. He cared for his council and the castle attendants, he cared for me and the children...”

She stopped short, tears welling in her eyes. “Oh god, the children.”

Her face contorted as she suppressed the floodgates, lips in a tight frown and brow knit.

Feorie approached the queen and hugged her. Cweneira returned her embrace. “Matra protects and Matra saves,” Feorie said. “I don’t know what happened to your kids, but if Matra had a hand in their fate, then we know they’re safe. And if we don’t know her plans for them, then there’s a reason for it. There’s always a reason.” She felt Cweneira’s tears on her shoulder. “Being a Vicar isn’t easy. I can’t begin to imagine the horrors you’ve just endured, but Matra sees your suffering and the faith you’ve held for her all the while. Trust in the Goddess who rewards the faithful. Trust in Matra who reunites mother and child.”

She released Cweneira. The queen rubbed her eyes.

“Thank you, Feorie.” Exhaling, the queenly Vicar relaxed her face into a peaceful expression. “That’s exactly what I needed to hear.”

The young Vicar smiled.

“Damn, Fey.” Alasdair broke the brief silence. “Where’d that come from? Next time just jump right into the poetry.”

Feorie shrugged. Grinning, Cweneira closed her eyes and chuckled.

A door slammed closed behind them. The three of them turned their heads toward the sound and froze.

Assembled at the foot of the doorway to the castle was a horde of blindfolded Oculuses, their dark red monk robes hanging down to their dirty feet, their bald heads shining in the daylight. But the knight and the two Vicars noticed first their myriad of eyes, all differing in quantity and arrangement on the face. Here, one with five eyes arranged in a pentagon; there, another with an eye on the forehead and an eye on its out-stretched tongue. Before the horde stood an Oculus with six eyes arranged in two rows on its cheeks; taking a step forward, the specimen addressed the three humans with an androgynous voice.

“Greetings, Vicars Cweneira and Feoriga. I hope you did not think to stay long in this chapel, for you are no longer welcome here. The statue of your Goddess lies in ruin, and thus the sanctuary now lies outside Matra’s domain. This is no longer your post, and we have been ordered to take up residence in Wry Dragael. Farewell to you both.”

Feorie’s fear turned into indignation and she scowled. “Hey! Now who do you think you are to kick a grieving woman out of her home?” Alasdair rushed to her side and brandished his spear.

“Feorie,” Cweneira interjected, her words hushed and rapid. “Feorie, get the white staff by the statue. Quickly!” She then addressed the Oculus horde. “Do you really think you can expel Matra’s Vicars from this kingdom without consequence? You already know what happens to the victims of her wrath.” She motioned to Sulymeigh’s limbless body.

“You fail to impress, my queen,” responded the six-eyed Oculus. “You already know the Red Kin are unafraid of a painful death. Tell your Goddess she can send us to Red Hell as many times as she wants. But be not surprised when it spits us back out.”

Feorie returned with Wrendor’s staff and handed it to Cweneira. Keeping her eyes on the Oculuses, the queen pointed the staff at them, displaying the talisman of the First Aegis still tied to the shaft. Following suit, Feorie unsheathed her dagger and let the talisman on the hilt hang on its tiny cord. The two Vicars and the knight now stood abreast to form a three-man phalanx.

“Let me be blunt,” said the queen. “We can’t simply let you take the castle. Did you think we would give it up so easily?”

The leader of the Oculuses smiled. “We anticipated resistance. Hoped for it, in fact.”

Those behind their six-eyed leader produced thin discolored tomes and crow-feather quills from their robes. After pricking their arms with the quill tip, they inscribed bloody diagrams and symbols into their books, hexes that flashed red and produced all sorts of bestial weaponry. Venomous quills, fanged snakes and giant mantis arms all sprouted from the spell-books which the Oculuses held before them like platters made from the prey of a hellish hunt. Before its hex-wielding brethren, the six-eyed Oculus wrung its hands a single time and its nails shot out to a knife’s length. Its eyes floated out of its head and formed a rotating ring in the air in front of its head, a spinning clockface of bloodshot gaze.

Faced with an advancing battalion of horrors, the three humans began their slow retreat, eyes wide, lips tight, sweaty palms gripping their weapons.

“Comrades.” A single, nerve-wracked word from Alasdair. “Wry Dragael is forfeited. Flee to the pebbled path and I’ll watch your backs.”

Sheathing her dagger with speedy finesse, Feorie snatched Cweneira’s hand as they ran for the ruinous exit. Keeping his watchful eyes on the approaching Oculus horde, Alasdair gave the Vicars a head start before he quickened his back-stepping and turned tail. He bounded over the wreckage of the chapel doors with a skillful leap, and once again, he found himself sprinting down the trail in the wake of holy personage. The three of them kicked up rocks in their panicked pace until they came to the royal gardens at the end of the pebbled path.

“I think we’re safe!” Cweneira exhaled as she caught her breath. “They don’t seem to be following.”

They all looked down the sunlit path from which they came. No Oculus had emerged from the chapel.

“So what do we do now?” Feorie asked.

“I don’t know,” Cweneira responded. “But we can’t stay here. Why would Red Hell command the Oculuses to take the castle? I didn’t think they had plans beyond carrying out Matra’s commission.” The queen crossed her arms. “Something’s not right. Seizing Wry Dragael could be the first of many invasions to come. So much of the continent has been cleared out by the Black Haze and Red Hell could mobilize troops with ease. Hell must know that Matra will notice the Oculuses’ occupation of the castle. Maybe they mean to distract her while they seize the other kingdoms?”

Alasdair spoke up. “We can’t stay here, but we also can’t be living on the lam when a divine territory war breaks out. We need to find a kingdom that’ll give us asylum.”

“I don’t suppose we could go back home.” said Feorie in a low tone. “We saw Rockwell become swallowed by the Haze while we hid in the Westpeaks.”

Cweneira wore a grim expression. “I’m afraid you’re right. Last I heard from our scouts, Rockwell had been cleared out. We need the protection of a well-armed kingdom.”

“From our view up in the mountains,” said Alasdair, “it looked like the Black Haze didn’t reach Haullydel. It should still have a healthy army and it’s the next closest city after Rockwell.”

Cweneira took several moments to contemplate before sharing her thoughts. “It’ll still take several days to get to Haullydel. And what if it’s Red Hell’s next target?”

“Well...” The knight took his turn to contemplate. “Anyone with a good sense of strategy would take a vacant city before a fortified one. Assuming the forces of Hell haven’t already taken Rockwell, they’re more likely to go there first over Haullydel.”

“So essentially, it’s the best option we have but there’s still a chance we could be walking right into the enemy.”

“That’s my take on it.”

Sighing, the queen knit her brow. “I don’t like the odds even if the worst possible outcome is slight. But what other choice do we have?”

Silence followed. Alasdair wore no expression. Feorie’s brow was raised quizzically.

“I suppose it’s settled,” Cweneira uttered at length. “We head towards the Brightpeaks.”

She spoke as if passing a death sentence.

Before Marrigen lay a vast sea of sand. The expanse of tawny dunes stretched forth with no end in sight and no wind to stir their grains. The Titaness stood at the foot of the desert, her toes impressed upon thin sand while her heels touched rocky ground. A barren wasteland of crags and dust lay behind her, a nearly lifeless habitat save for trees of pale bones sprouting from the dry cracks in the earth. Underneath a cavernous canopy looming miles above her, Marrigen stood alone at the elision of the two wastes, a single soul in a vista of arid emptiness.

About a dozen meters away, a giant cocoon of scaly reptile skin slowly emerged from the dunes. It unearthed itself and rose into the air, hovering several meters above the rolling waves of desiccation. As it floated over to Marrigen, she observed that the scaled hides of desert creatures comprised the pupa's skin: striped cobras, spiny horned lizards, and speckled Gila monsters. The cocoon came to a stop a few yards away from the Titaness and a tall slit grew down the middle of the reptilian mass. The slit blinked open to reveal a yellow snake eye whose pupil widened into a black chasm; Lewyn and Caerlyn came tumbling from its depths covered in blood and sticky eyeball fluid. The slit closed for a moment before reopening back into a yellow eye, and fifteen-eyed crocodile heads sprouted up all over the chrysalis.

“Greetings, huntress,” said Retribution with its scaly maws. “I require a favor from you.”

Disdain came to Marrigen's expression. “And it involves two sniveling children?”

“Indeed. This is Lewyn and Caerlyn of Wry Dragael, the progeny of King Sulymeigh himself. I see potential in these little larvae; the boy, at least, has already shown us how he

delights in violence. I have given them residence in the Bleeding Pyramid until this point, but we now need to evacuate the edifice in order to weaponize it.”

“So you need me to relocate them.”

“Exactly. Hide them away in the cave where we convened in council, and take measures to ensure their survival or else you’ll be the one who has to find them.”

“Fine. Any other conditions? Or can we now see what you brought for me today?”

The Pupa fluttered its eyelid. A tear of blood the size of a wine barrel welled up at the corner of its eye and fell to the sand below, splashing crimson on Lewyn’s heels. A blood-glazed quiver full of arrows lay in the middle of the damp red sand.

“The Oculuses have produced fine handiwork yet again,” said Retribution. “The attraction hexes on the arrows correspond to the one on the quiver and activate once the arrows are shot and come to rest. Essentially, the arrows return to the quiver after they hit their mark.”

Marrigen knelt before the blood-soaked sand and took the weaponry. Selecting an arrow from among the dozens, she eyed its barbed tip.

“My god, I’ve never seen bloodiron like this.”

“Type AB positive, completely unalloyed,” said the Pupa. “The Oculuses pride themselves in their ability to draw iron from blood.”

The Titaness unslung her bow from her shoulder, nocked an arrow and pulled back the drawstring. She let the arrow fly into a nearby dune and watched as the arrow came to rest, leapt into the air with a spray of sand, and arced back to the quiver as if the dune had returned a volley. A sly grin came to her face. “Truly impressive. I’m sure it’ll fell good game for the kids to eat.”

“My intentions exactly. My acolytes also made a matching bow that can shoot these arrows straight out for several kilometers before they arc downwards. Keep the kids alive until the Pyramid is habitable again and the bow is yours.”

“Mmm, more reward than I’ve seen from Matra.”

“We may be born from her wrath, but we can still be more noble than her.”

Marrigen gave a single nod. Lewyn scooped up a handful of sand and poured it on his sister’s feet. Caerlyn patted the sand around her with infantile curiosity.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” said the huntress. “Why don’t we try bartering with Haulydel? In exchange for safe passage to the Brightpeaks, we could offer to protect them from the fallout of our rebellion. Attacking the city isn’t our only option.”

A brief pause.

“Look at me, Marrigen. Look at us, look at your comrades, look at all the inhabitants of this place. Look at what this Hell creates. The spawn of a deity’s wrath can be not but hideous in the eyes of men, for we are meant to deter the evil acts of mankind. How do you think the rulers of Earth would react to us approaching in the guise of diplomats? They know us only for enacting the Goddess’s punishments. Every bargain we proffer, every compromise we propose is met with fear and suspicion, and rightly so.”

“So that’s it?” Marrigen said, her words tinged with despair. “We’ll never make peace with Earth? We’ll always be the enemy and there’s nothing else we can do about it?”

“We’re doing something about it at this very moment. Our plans to overthrow Matra will yield many rewards, and renewing our reputation is but one. Now let us continue with these plans, for we have made enough delay. Hide the children away in the council cave so we can use the Pyramid against Matra. I left a quill and parchment on your seat at the

convention table. Use them to make a bloodletting hex and hide the hexed parchment under a rock near the entrance of the cave. We don't want third parties discovering the kids' whereabouts."

"Indeed." Marrigen approached Sulymeigh's children, dropped to one knee, and took them by the hand. Positioned like a priestess before a holy effigy, she looked up at the grand chrysalis of scales and crocodile heads suspended in the air before her.

"Farewell, good spirit. And as always, thank you for your gifts."

Her body twisted into her crow-winged arachnid form, the children becoming dark green leeches on her abdomen, and she flew away with her two parasitic passengers. Retribution watched her depart, then closed its oblong eye and slowly descended into the ground. It sank beneath the sand and disappeared from sight, leaving the two wastelands to their barren silence.

IX. The Abyss

Vast grassy fields lay under the open sky. The few clouds above the rolling vista of green cast remote shadows on the emerald knolls, their trim tresses of grass flowing with the early autumn breeze. Basking in the bright midday sun, the endless meadows lay speckled with short white flowers, small yet eager offerings to their golden provider. A grey rabbit hopped about the base of a verdant hill, sniffing at one of the blossoms. It turned its fuzzy thoughtless head away and descried the myriad of flowers all around it, choices sprouting from the ground that its nose must appraise.

The grass behind it rustled, the source-less sound of a shifting foot. The rabbit's ears perked up and it scampered away without delay.

“Dammit!” More sound without source. A holy chime rang throughout the fields and Feorie materialized out of thin air holding her dagger, the talisman of Selvra's Eclipse swinging from the crossguard. She watched as the little bunny disappeared into a rabbit hole beside the nearest knoll. “Ah, oh well.” Two dead cottontails hung from her belt. Sheathing her dagger, the young Vicar turned on her heel and began walking back to her camp.

Before long, she reached the top of a tall hill. Looking down, she saw Cweneira sitting at its base while she tied a talisman to her white staff. Alasdair sat beside her skinning a young buck with a short hunting knife; within arm's reach lay his pack, spear, bow and quiver. Her pace short and quick, Feorie hurried down the hill and met them at the bottom.

“I only got my hands on two rabbits,” she said as she pulled her prey from her belt, “but I also found a patch of strawberries.” She pulled a leather pouch from her belt as well and sat on the grass with Cweneira and Alasdair, forming a three-man circle. The little Vicar plucked a plump strawberry from the pouch and popped it in her mouth before setting the pouch on the ground before them. Alasdair took a berry to snack on while he cut long thin strips of meat from the deer and laid them a foot away from the bag of berries. Having tied the talisman of the Dawnbringer to her staff, Cweneira struck the ground with the bottom of it, causing the tip at the other end to glow white-hot with the Flame of Haulyd. She pointed the smoldering tip down and held it just above the flanks of meat, cooking them through within seconds.

“We'll save the rabbits for later,” said Alasdair. “We have enough venison jerky for three people.”

Feorie sighed. “That’s a fair meal, I suppose. We’ve eaten worse than this lately.”

“Always slim pickings. It makes me reminisce about our dining in Rockwell. King Owen had some fine imports.”

“Ah, don’t remind me. I’d kill for one of those wine and pork dinners from the summer festivals.”

Alasdair turned to Cweneira. “What’s Dragaelic food like?”

The queen swallowed a bite of venison. “Mostly fish, bread and winter vegetables, although we do receive shipments of citrus from the southern kingdoms. Salted cod with lemon zest is our signature.”

“Sounds delicious,” said Feorie. She bit off a piece of jerky and stared off into the expanse of lush grassland. “My god, what a world we live in. Such natural beauty that provides for us with hunts and harvests. Fish in the river, game in the forest, crops in the fields, fruit on the trees and shrubs, all of it spread throughout bountiful greenery. What miraculous love Matra must have to create a world of such sustenance and splendor for us.”

Cweneira smiled warmly. Alasdair cast his gaze around the meadows. “Truly marvelous,” he said. “No doubt the Vicars have stories as to the origins of it all?”

The queen answered with a question. “You’ve never heard our tale of creation?”

“Must have missed that one when I was a squire.”

“Really?” Feorie chimed in. “I thought everyone knew about it. Cwen, can you please educate my bodyguard? You’ve probably heard it more times than I have.”

“Certainly,” the queen responded. “What else have we to do while we travel? Let’s pack up and I’ll regale you on the road.”

Cweneira took up her staff. Feorie grabbed her strawberry pouch and fixed it to her belt while Alasdair collected his equipment. Having stripped off and eaten its lean meat, the three of them left the emaciated deer carcass behind as they resumed their excursion across the rolling green. The queen took a moment to collect the details of her narrative and then launched into her tale.

“Before the dawn of time, there was naught but darkness. All matter was conjoined in a single black mass, unmoving and without form. How long the ubiquitous dark remained still and amorphous is immeasurable for much of it never took action or form, yet incalculably vast was this nothingness that still lingers throughout all creation as the inky night sky. But nothing can stay without structure for long.

“Of its own accord, the first pattern emerged from the cosmos, an arrangement of matter that linked with the dark particles around it and expanded into the first intelligible substance: the mind of Matra. The ethereal godhead saw the nothingness she was born into and decided it was inadequate, so her mind created a hand of workmanship that fashioned the darkness into the first celestial bodies: shining suns, silver moons and barren planets. These companions of Matra had structure and mass but knew not how to take action, and thus remained motionless in the darkness. Matra then created for herself a body to relate to the suns, moons and planets, and housed her mind in it, a form that we now dub feminine out of its capacity to birth from its own substance. The Goddess then conceived the order under which movement was possible, governing all matter in the Fivefold Aspects of Time: beginning, growing, thriving, decaying and dying. Embodying all these Aspects at once, she became eternal throughout every age and set every motion throughout the universe along the cycle of these five stages.

“Thus, Matra gave the celestial bodies their beginning by spinning them in her hand, putting them into near-perpetual motion, and casting them out into the dark void. By this act, she created the primordial universe, of which our ever-racing sun and moon took part. But she too considered this cosmic configuration to be inadequate, and thus sought to decorate it with the light of her being. Digging her nails into her hand, she drew her own golden blood and flicked it all throughout the universe, sprinkling the void with droplets of stars. Likewise, she smeared two divine fingers with her blood and painted the darkness with it, creating the milky streaks of galaxy that appear in the summer night sky.

“In her budding artistry, Matra desired to make her universe more complex. She took the formless void once again and organized it into creations of coherent states: solids, liquids, gases and the fleeting heat needed to change one state into another. Traveling throughout the cosmos, the Goddess visited the several planets to rid them of their emptiness, and doling out her new coherent creations, she planted snow-peaked mountains throughout their continents and filled the earthy basins with water, she wrapped the several worlds in blankets of flowing air and placed hearths of fire in their cores. Matra, the supreme Goddess, brought color and life to a universe of darkness and desolation, and all things good and natural were conceived in her mind and fashioned by her hand. It was she, the Creatrix, who spread fish throughout the rivers and gave our game their shaded homes. It was Matra, the first goddess, who rooted the crops and fruit throughout the fields and forests.”

Silence but for their steps through the rustling grass.

“Huh.” Alasdair’s gaze was on the green earth before him.

“Wait a minute,” said Feorie, brow furrowed. “I think you’ve embellished a bit.

Matra’s mind didn’t form a hand to make the celestial bodies herself. She taught the void

how to become substance like she had and it turned itself into the several suns, moons and planets of its own volition. Likewise with their first movements, Matra taught them how to set themselves along the Fivefold Aspects and they chose to spin in place as their beginning.”

“I’ve heard that version as well,” the queen responded, “and I imagine it arose from a modern school of Vicars. The older way of thinking to which I’m more privy is that Matra created everything by her own hand and is thus at least somewhat responsible for every facet of the world, good or bad. Being the Goddess of love and mercy, the good facets must have been intended, but the bad ones must be either mistakes of the hand or errors in judgment. However, the more modern school reasons that Matra cannot err as we understand it because human judgment is imperfect itself and is thus unsuitable to assess Matra’s actions.

Therefore, they crafted a version of the creation story where her culpability isn’t a factor. It’s no longer her fault that the world is flawed because she didn’t create it herself, the void made it of its own substance. She’s not to blame for Earth’s faulty operations because the Earth misunderstood Matra’s teachings.”

“Oh, interesting. I heard my version from the previous Vicar of Rockwell, so she must have been from the new way of thinking. I personally believe Matra can make mistakes, though. I mean, she made humans and humans are imperfect, so therefore Matra must also be imperfect. Every creation is a reflection of its creator, right?”

Brief contemplation. “Damn,” said Alasdair. “Really gives you a lot to chew on. What have your years of piety taught you to believe, my queen? Is Matra imperfect?”

With no immediate response, Alasdair and Feorie turned their eyes to the queen. Cweneira’s austere gaze was fixed on the ground, her brow knit.

“The Creatrix is indeed imperfect, but the evils of the universe are no mistake. I have no doubt after what I’ve seen that all blessed and accursed things were wholly intentional, the latter designed to punish. Punish her trespassers and torment them to whatever extent she pleases. I’m unsure whether Sulymeigh had simply rejected her love or the Goddess put it aside herself.”

Silence but for their heavy breath as they hiked the tall hill before them. As Feorie struggled to keep up, Alasdair turned his head toward the queen, searching her expression. Cweneira’s grave stare remained on her feet.

The trio crested the hill and beheld the panorama before them.

Feorie: “Oh my god.”

About an arrow’s shot away from the hill lay a chasm in the earth that could swallow a village. The pit of vast emptiness interrupted the rolling landscape so abruptly that a divine hand had seemingly wiped a square kilometer clean from existence; the surrounding grass stood wavering at the edge of the circular black void and the river running adjacent to the abyss seemed to barely avoid spilling over into its depths, curving away as if repulsed.

“What the hell is this?” Alasdair uttered.

“Draw your weapons.” Cweneira’s eyes were full of trepidation. “Whatever it is, we need to pass around it on the far side. The river cuts off our route to Haulysel.”

“Any clue what it is?”

“I have my suspicions.”

Feorie brandished her dagger, Alasdair his spear and Cweneira her staff. The three of them descended the hill with slow measured steps and crossed the short span of grass to the foot of the abyss. As they approached, their ears picked up the low echoing tones emanating

from the dark depths, a tuneless chorus in the gullet of the yawning chasm. Wearing an expression of concern, Feorie knelt before the massive black expanse and put both hands on the very edge of it, her left still clutching her dagger.

“Fey!” cried Alasdair.

“Hello?” Her voice echoed down into the darkness, empty, hollow and unresponsive. After a moment, she snatched up a rock from beside her foot, held it over the drop, and released it from her palm. The rock fell, disappearing into the blackness without a sound. Several seconds later, a soft thud echoed up from the depths and a dull cry of pain followed, harmonizing with its moaning peers.

“There are people down there!” Feorie exclaimed.

“My god,” said Alasdair. “How does one person survive a fall like that, much less a whole swath?”

“Wait.” Cweneira’s head was turned. “Are you seeing this?”

She pointed to her right. A discolored leather-bound book lay on the grass a half dozen meters from them. The chain connected to its spine ran a short length back to a rusty stake in the ground to which it was tethered, anchoring the book to a three-meter radius. Beside the book was a wooden bucket that also sported a chain, one that connected its handle to a metal prisoner’s cuff.

“Just what in the hell did we stumble upon?” Alasdair’s words were pure exasperation.

He and Feorie watched Cweneira approach the book with measured caution, pointing her staff at it as she crept up. The queen poked the tome with the pallid rod, and upon seeing

no reaction from it, bent down to pick it up. The chain clinked with her movements as she thumbed through the book in her genuflection.

“What does it say?” Feorie strode over to Cweneira and looked over her shoulder.

“I can’t read most of it,” the queen responded. “This is an archaic version of the common tongue that I haven’t studied much. If only Wrendor was here.”

“Who’s Wrendor?”

“The High Cleric of Wry Dragael. He was the first victim of the Arrival.”

Alasdair approached. “You said it’s written in old language, right? This hole could have been here for hundreds of years then.”

“It seems so. Thankfully, Wrendor taught me a few phrases. It also looks somewhat similar to our modern dialect. This word looks like ‘hamlet’ and this one looks like ‘gate,’ and I assume ‘Reta Hilde’ means Red Hell...”

She flipped through the book until she came to the last page, discolored and blank if not for a single sentence.

“Wet the walls lest the prisoner climbs out.”

“Wet the walls?” said Alasdair. “Are you sure that’s an accurate translation?”

“No need to translate. It’s the only page written in modern dialect.”

After perusing the book for several minutes, Cweneira closed it and dropped it on the grass. The chain clinked as it hit the ground. “As far as I can tell, the book is a logbook that instructs us on how to deal with the pit that swallowed Knoll Nellie, an old hamlet that appears to have fallen under the control of the Red Kin. I reckon the bucket is meant to cover the book from the rain and collect water from the river, and the chains are to prevent us from mistakenly dropping them into the abyss. We are to pour the water along the walls of the hole

so that they become too slippery for whatever's down there to crawl up. This hole, which may have once been a portal to Red Hell, is a prison and we are now its new jailers."

Feorie picked up the bucket with one hand and held its chained cuff in the other. "Except the jailers wear the chains. How bizarre. Who was here before us and what happened to them?"

"I know not."

Alasdair planted the butt of his spear on the ground and put his other hand on his hip. "Pardon my bluntness, but we don't have time for this. War between Matra and Red Hell can break out at any moment and the last place we want to be is next to an old gate to Hell. Haullydel still awaits."

Cweneira crossed her arms. "It seems the time has come to balance priorities. Shelter from the coming storm is indeed paramount, but we've stumbled upon a possible pawn in the war. Red Hell may have killed the previous wardens of the pit so that the abyssal prisoner could free itself and join Hell's ranks, but that's just one of many unknowns. We also have no guess as to how long the pit has been unguarded, nor as to how fast the prisoner can climb."

"So we can't stay here but we also can't leave this place unguarded," Alasdair assessed.

An idea occurred to Feorie. "Suppose we dig canals from the river to the pit? If we space them out correctly, the water would run down the walls on all sides day and night. No one would have to guard this place ever again!"

"A perfect solution," replied the knight, "if only we had digging tools. The river may be a stone's throw away, but it might take too long to dig with our hands. And there's no materials in these meadows by which we could make a shovel."

Silence ensued. The trio spent several moments contemplating their possibilities. At length, Alasdair took the bucket from Feorie and fastened the cuff to his wrist.

“Continue now to Haulydel, good Vicars. I’ll stay behind and attend to the abyss. While I’m wary of sending you two off without my protection, your lives may be in greater jeopardy if you stay here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Feorie said. “Just give us another minute to think this through.”

Alasdair hesitated at first but responded in turn. “Fey, we’ve assessed the situation. Safety is paramount, but your safety is paramount over mine. Allowing you to die here when war breaks out would be the greatest failure of my life and I’m not going to let that happen, even if it means I have to stay behind.”

“No, you jest, you can’t do this. You were assigned to me, as a bodyguard. You’re not serious, Al. Tell me you’re not being serious.”

“As serious as the grave. Remember to keep your dagger ready at all times on the road.”

“Al, please,” Feorie pleaded. “You don’t have to do this! There must be another way.”

“This doesn’t have to be a death sentence, Fey. Matra willing, I may have enough days to dig your canals by hand and catch up with you later.”

Cweneira stepped in. “Let’s not be too hasty. The hour is getting late, and a final decision can wait until the morning. Let’s just wet the walls for now and sleep on it.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea!” Feorie said. “Come now, Al, I’m sure we’ll think of some way out of this.”

Alasdair took a moment. Feorie’s anxious eyes remained fixed on him.

“Alright, I suppose that’s reasonable,” he said. Feorie brightened into a smile and he continued. “But let’s hurry to fetch some water. We can’t lose all sense of urgency here.”

The world was dark. The grass, barely visible through the shaded atmosphere, lay far from Cweneira’s reach, for her dreaming consciousness hung in the air over the pitch-black pit. Below her was endless obscurity, a hole of utter nothingness that housed the unknown creature.

“Come to me.” A sea of voices echoed up from the abyss below.

The queen turned her bodiless gaze to the grass, and there in the dark swirling ether was her pallid staff, a shining beacon that illuminated the patch of meadow in which it lay. From the wisps of the shadowy air emerged a figure, a red-haired woman dressed in crimson robes with golden cuffs on her wrists. She shone not with the white light of the staff, but with the smoldering glow of a hearth, a pulsing orange radiance of comfort and warmth. The lady of incandescence knelt beside the pallid rod and took it with her left hand, its pale illumination mixing with her tangerine glow.

“Come to me,” she sang with multiple voices. She pulled the Talisman of the First Aegis from her neck, and with slow and measured dexterity, she tied the talisman at the tip of the staff rather than the middle. Striking the ground with the bottom, the talisman rebounded in its tether and emitted the petite ring of a wind chime. The eye of Cweneira’s mind expected to see the talisman’s bubble of protection form around the glowing woman but instead watched a smaller orb the size of a melon materialize at the rod’s tip.

“Can’t you hear them wail...” She harmonized with herself in chilling dissonance. The voices from the darkness below swelled to cries of anguish and piercing screams.

Despite her stoic expression, rivulets of silver tears began streaming down her cheeks in such volumes that her red robes became soaked in mere seconds. Now standing a puddle of her own liquid lamentations, she pointed the pallid staff down and drew the tip from the edge of her pooling tears to the rim of the abyss. The shining bubble carved out the ground in its path, leaving a ravine of excavated earth through which the pool of tears ran to the abyss and cascaded down the curving walls.

“Continue now to Haulysel, my good Vicar, and inherit not this guardianship.”

Cweneira awoke and sat up. Leaning back with her hands on the grass, she held herself up on straightened arms as the warm hues of the dawn bathed her in its soft peachy sunlight. A dozen meters before her the fateful pit lay, and behind her Alasdair knelt beside the river filling the bucket. To her left lay Feorie sleeping on her side, and to her right lay the white rod. She snatched it up in her hand.

“Put the pail away,” she called out to Alasdair, “we have no more use for it.”

Returning with the bucket, the knight stopped short, wearing a quizzical look. Feorie began to stir awake.

“Can I ask you to elaborate?” he said.

The queen unfastened the Talisman of the First Aegis from her neck, “I dreamed of Motherly Matra just moments ago. Coming to me in the form of a priestess, she glowed with warmth and comfort in her radiant aspect, and it was with this enlightenment that she revealed a solution to me.”

Cweneira tied the talisman to the tip of her staff and struck the grass with the bottom end. Bouncing off the rod, the amulet rang out with a small chime and the First Aegis

appeared at the tip, a radiant orb atop the long rod. Striding past Alasdair, she came to the bank of the river and pointed the bubble-tipped staff down to its muddy shore. Alasdair's curiosity became disbelief as he watched the shining bubble carve out the shore where its curvature touched the ground, and water immediately rushed in to fill the excavation. Like a bull pulling its plow through a field, the queen dragged the shining staff behind her from the shore to the grass and all the way down to the edge of the abyss; the river split off into the makeshift canal and followed the queen in her wake. Reaching the dark pit, the water spilled over the rim and spread downwards, clinging to the earthy wall and wetting the soil as it descended into the sunless depths.

Feorie picked herself up from the grass, yawned and rubbed her eyes. "Wait, what's happening?"

"Look!" her knight responded.

The two watched the queen return to the river where she again put the First Aegis to the shore and carved out another ravine. Feorie's jaw dropped with elation as Cweneira drew the cutting current to another part of the abyssal edge.

"Miraculous, Cwen!" the young Vicar exclaimed. "Can I help?"

"I've got it, just pack up your effects."

The queen spent the next several minutes going back and forth from the river to the gargantuan pit. At the end of her labor, all its earthy walls were wet and slippery from the branching river, whose new rushing currents drowned out the morose voices in the depths. Having ended her task on the far side of the abyss, Cweneira struck the grass with the bottom of the staff and the First Aegis at the tip disappeared with the chime of the talisman. She strode back over to Feorie and Alasdair.

“Come now with me to Haulydel, my companions,” said the queen, “for we have eradicated our guardianship.”

X. Haulydel

It stood in the endless expanse of sand dunes and desiccation, looming high over the desert, a monument of pure gold. The Pyramid pierced the sky in its vast isosceles proportions and glittered in the fiery glow of Red Hell, testifying to the opulence and grandeur this terrible realm afforded. The wind blew gusts of sand against the pristine edifice and buffeted the flock of sorry souls around it, a multitude of hundreds kneeling naked before the Pyramid in coerced prayer, their heads bowed low. Skinless red denizens walked throughout the sacrificial ranks with whips of braided hair and porcupine quills in hand, their gaze vigilant, their weapons ready to punish the unruly.

Before the Pyramid’s entrance, that dark doorless portico with its golden awning and columns, the ground erupted in a shower of sand as Retribution the Imago emerged from the tawny earth, incarnate from the reptiles of its former chrysalis. Topped with a headless stump, its thick scaly neck was rooted in a pentagonal thorax of dragon bodies, five outward-facing bellies with two clawed appendages each. With giant wings of membranous skin and mantis arms bladed with colossal snake fangs, the scaly insectoid crawled forth on the countless legs of its slithering tail, a gruesome kebab of grafted alligator bodies. Using its long mantis blades to hoist itself onto the triangular temple, the colossal wraith climbed the slope of glittering gold bricks and curled its crocodilian centipede body around the pointed pinnacle.

“Rise, my hapless congregation,” it proclaimed voicelessly from on high, “and make procession into the temple.”

The red denizens lashed the multitude with their spiky whips. Piercing screams erupted from the congregation, blood springing from their backs. The people hastened to form a single file as their skinless slavedrivers penned them in like sheep, their path darkening as blood streamed down their legs and colored the sand. They walked a blood-spattered procession into the Pyramid, keeping their nerve-wracked eyes on their feet lest they gaze upon the monstrous Imago towering over them. Passing under the golden awning, they entered the gleaming temple through the portico and disappeared into the darkness inside. Within minutes, the edifice became pregnant with living bodies from base to summit.

Retribution descended the Pyramid head-first, leaving a trail of scratch marks with its clawed legs, and crawled down onto the tawny ground. Now standing before the entryway, the reptilian centipede bent downwards and spat scaly eggs from the gory stump of its neck onto the dark sand. Hatchling Larvae burst through the course eggshells, surveyed their birthplace with their fifteen-fold vision, and squirmed along the trail of blood into the Pyramid, the scent of the red sand promising prey to slake their hunger. Standing by as its offspring passed through the dark doorway, the Imago seized the last of the spawn to hatch in its mantis vise and beheaded the babe, sawing through the neck and coating its serrated blades with verdant blood. Skewering the five-fold dragon head in its twin claws, Retribution raised it to the stump of its own neck where the skull of the progeny and the spine of the parent fused together; the grafted dragon head grew insect pincers on its cheeks and a myriad of eyes all over its face.

Turning its newfound sight to the triangular temple before it, the Imago watched as the feast inside commenced. The sound of gnashing teeth and snapping sinews filled the air as shrill melodies of wailing accompanied, creating a symphony of slaughter as the Larvae filled their gullets with shrieking sacrifices. The gleaming edifice could no longer contain the swelling carnage within, and its internal hemorrhaging spilled forth through the cracks in its glittering skin. The Imago looked on with sickly satisfaction as blood began to spill out from the seams of the golden bricks and trickle down in thick streams, a crimson cascade that the dry desert gulped down. Thus, the temple once more earned its namesake as the Bleeding Pyramid, a shrine of glistening gold and red, a monument to awe and horror.

The ritual now complete, Retribution turned away from the Pyramid and took off into the air on its wings of stretched skin, stirring up gusts in the bloodthirsty sand. The behemoth soared high above the arid landscape and viewed a panorama of its realm as it sailed through the air. Whizzing by far below was the sea of rolling dunes and the creatures beneath that awaited wandering prey, to the right lay miles of rusty red plateaus and the sunless caves within, and to the left lay the Writhing Forest with its trees of branching snakes, scaly hydras rooted in twitching mantis-arm grass. Flying past the edge of the desert, the Imago now sailed over the cracked, rocky wastes where it had met Morrigan only days before, a bone-dry landscape inhabited by six-legged lizards and their many-eyed insect prey that picked the bone-trees clean of their fleshy scraps. All of Red Hell is born of flesh or flame, every biome a carnal mimicry of natural environment or a vista of dry heat and igneous rock.

After soaring over the dusty wasteland for several minutes, the yellow-brown landscape darkened into a brick-red quarry and then into black beach. Beating its vast wings against its forward momentum, Retribution came to a hover where burgundy met black and

landed on the hot, dark sand. Proceeding on foot, the colossal centipede skittered across the drifts of opaque grains to crest a ridge of tall dunes, descrying from on high the Ocean of Blood and the vast army at its shore. Before the crashing waves of salty crimson stood endless ranks of red denizens, their face-masks expressionless as Fleshbane, the Succubus Queen and Vteskelr moved among them with black quills in each hand. The Muses of the red prophet had joined the task as well: the ritual summoner Arcessendak with his long locks, who knows all manner of profane invocation; the ever-suffering Lacrymosa, who sings in choruses of wails with three mouths, whose scars run from eye to jaw; the bald seer Hexinity, whose blindfolded vision sees hazy runes in the darkness of her mind's eye; and Veruak the four-armed impaler, the warrior-muse clad in alligator skin armor, gleaming tusks protruding from his lower jaw. Visiting the battalions, the Titans and Muses brought their dark pens to the forehead of each soldier and tattooed them with the Bloodthirst Hex, a staple in Red Hell's war tactics that heals battle wounds upon the imbibing of blood.

Retribution descended the sandy crest and came to the foot of the dunes. Scuttling forth to within a dozen meters of the army, the Imago called out to its confreres.

“To me, Titans! Muses can carry on.”

The Muses turned back to their work as the Titans weaved their way among the soldiers to approach Retribution. With its three acolytes now standing before it, the looming insectoid addressed them in turn.

“Our preparations are near complete. The Pyramid is vacant and ready for weaponization, the progeny of Sulymeigh hidden away. Have you yet infested Cweneira's mind, Vteskelr?”

“It is done,” the red prophet responded. “My Muse, Lacrymosa, visited the dreaming Dragaelic queen in the guise of Matra. Cweneira gave credence to her suggestion and flooded the pit at Knoll Nellie.”

“How much longer until the prisoner surfaces?”

The hexes on Vteskelr’s blindfold flashed golden. “The water level has risen to about halfway. Our prisoner should float to the top by the time Haulydel is laid to waste.”

“Excellent. Send your Muse of Ritual to the prisoner when it is freed. Once Fleshbane has devoured Haulydel and returned here, we’ll order the Muse to summon the prisoner to Haulydel. There, at the foot of the Brightpeaks, will the final battle commence.”

Fleshbane clenched his jaw, his lidless eyes wide, a slight smile exuding anticipation. Retribution turned its many-eyed gaze to the Succubus Queen.

“Quite an army you’ve amassed. Well done.”

“Thank you, good spirit,” the Queen said with her scaled tongue. “If their ferocity in bed is equal in battle, Haulydel will fall within minutes.”

“We shall see. Their lack of armor is concerning.”

“It is regrettable, but compared to weapons, armor takes three times as much bloodiron to make. However, their raw flesh allows their bodies to soak up blood and heal from the Bloodthirst Hex, so we should be able to sustain them by constantly splashing them with red.”

“A creative solution, and possibly an effective one. But again, we shall see. Fleshbane, are you prepared to follow up on the siege?”

“Quite so,” the dark man-beast responded.

“So at this very moment, you could devour Haulyd and house the flame of the sun within you?”

Fleshbane handed his black quills to Vteskelr. “Do you need a demonstration?”

The red prophet and the Succubus retreated several steps, leaving the hellish wraith and the horned man-beast to stare each other down. With mere meters between Retribution and its dark acolyte, the Imago opened its sharp pincers wide and curled its fivefold maw back on itself like a fleshy flower springing into bloom. Looking straight into the dark gullet that loomed above him, Fleshbane watched as a stream of roaring flame erupted from Retribution’s raw glistening mouth, engulfing him in all-consuming fire. His vision was nothing but raging orange as he stood in Retribution’s searing jet and his leather skin hardened all the more as he withstood the endless streaming blaze. After several seconds, Fleshbane opened his mouth against the blast and sucked the flames down his throat, the torrential inferno passing from the wraith’s maw into the stomach of the man-beast. Retribution curled its mouth closed and so too did the Titan shut his jagged jaws, the conflagration between them dissipating (fizzling out?) with a plume of black smoke. Belly distended, the man-beast held the looming insect’s gaze.

Retribution spoke. “Ignite the sky.”

Fleshbane turned his horned head up and became a volcano. Unpairing his lips, he released the raging furnace within him in an explosion of skyward flame that spread across the cavernous ceiling of Red Hell miles above. The veins in his bloodshot eyes throbbed as he channeled the titanic eruption and his thick arms shook as he clenched his fists with the strain. At length, he expelled all of Retribution’s fire from his gut, leaving the air around his

mouth hazy with heat and his dark teeth glowing bright orange. He turned his head back down to the Imago and awaited its appraisal.

Returning his gaze, the colossal insect folded its mantis arms in and straightened its back. “This should be adequate,” it said as the two other Titans returned. “Carry on with your tasks and report back once the army is ready. Thence shall we open the threshold to Earth and commence the penultimate battle.”

“Very well, good spirit,” said the Succubus Queen. Vteskelr handed Fleshbane his quills, and the three Titans turned and strode back to the army at the dark shores of blood. Retribution watched them leave, then unfolded its mantis arms and burrowed into the black beach. The wraith was gone with a spray of sand.

Feorie stared up at the twinkling night sky. Speckled with piercing stars and streaked with milky galaxy, the canvas of deep velvety blue in the heavens hung overhead as she walked with her knight and the holy queen. As they journeyed in the dead of night, the lofty moon shone with its pallid brightness and bathed the rolling meadows in its pearlescent light. The trio traversed the sleeping grassland below the glittering sky on this warm, windless night. All was calm, all was mild, all was peaceful.

“My god,” Feorie uttered, her head still turned skywards. “For all its trials and tribulations, this journey is a blessing through and through, one of natural wonder and spectacle. I cannot help but be in awe of Matra’s vast creations and the aid she now bestows through them. Truly, she has smiled upon our journey with guiding stars and shining moonlight.”

“You can be quite the poet, my little Vicar,” said Alasdair. “But I find it hard to believe that Matra personally sees to every little thing around us. Suppose such a night like tonight is just happenstance?”

“Nothing is just happenstance, Al.”

“Care to explain?”

She turned her head from the starry heavens down to the ground in front of her, watching her own pace. “Of course, the supreme Goddess cannot see to everything, but that doesn’t mean she has no hand in it. When our queen recounted the tale of creation, she stopped right before getting to the Divine Delegation, the point in which the various gods came into being. After Matra crafted the universe, she realized she had made it so vast that she could not personally attend to it all by herself, so she created the gods from her own radiant mind and delegated her powers to them. To Cton she gave the earth with all its mountains and caves, and to Grisie she gave flora and fauna. To Haulyd she bestowed the sun and its fiery power, and to Selvra the silver moon and stars. So, although it is quiet Selvra who orchestrated this lovely night, the goddess received dominion of the night from Motherly Matra, and with it, the direction of its use. It is far easier for Matra to direct her delegates than to do their tasks herself, and she can revoke her delegated powers if her delegates fail to obey her. Indeed, Selvra has blessed us tonight but only under Matra’s orders.”

“So nothing about this world is unattended?” the knight queried. “Nothing is left to chance, the universe just rolling the dice?”

“There are too many gods for that. Everything that exists has a divine agent behind it.”

“I don’t know if I find that believable.”

“That’s fine, Al,” Feorie said. “It’s not uncommon to have your doubts.”

Cweneira joined in. “It’s quite common, actually. I hardly know a layman who buys into all the doctrine. You need not give credence to all the details so long as you have faith in Matra and her plans for us. Dogma involves detail, but faith need not.”

“Then why have all the detail?” said Alasdair.

“Well,” said the queen, “it’s for those who want a more nuanced explanation of the world around us. Religion offers many things to layman and clergy alike, and of all these, comfort is perhaps the most significant. Not just comfort amid our sufferings in life, but also the comfort that comes from understanding those aspects of humanity and nature that science fails to explain. Without religion, people who lack spiritual intelligence would be lost within themselves, for they know not how to make sense of their own mind or the world we live in.”

“Spiritual intelligence?”

“Indeed. Of all the guises of intelligence, spiritual intelligence is the capacity to look at yourself and the universe and come to your own understanding of it all. It can be informed by one or many religions and philosophies, but ultimately the individual creates his or her own dogma.”

They continued a half dozen paces more through the moonlit grass before Alasdair spoke again. “Forgive me if this is out of line, but by your definition, it could be said that no member of the clergy has spiritual intelligence. By the sheer fact of being clergy, they’re constrained to wholly buy into their religion’s explanations for everything at the expense of reaching their own conclusions. The way they understand the world has been supplied for them by whoever decides what’s dogma and what isn’t.”

“That would all be true except no one’s deciding what’s dogma. Matra tells us the details directly through collective dreams. When Matra visits Vicars in their sleep and relates universal truths to them, they all convene in council and peer review each other’s dreams so that no one can lie about what Matra has related. If your account of Matra’s words lines up with what everyone else was told, then it becomes dogma. We’d be fools to reject corroborated truths.”

“That’s all fine and well, but you do understand that it looks suspicious to an outsider, right? How are laymen supposed to know the Vicars aren’t conspiring together, presenting falsehoods as corroborated truths?”

“Spiritual intelligence, my good knight. Laymen could and should decide for themselves if Vicars speak the truth. Take it, leave it, pick out parts of it and reject the rest; all we can do is relay what Matra’s told us.”

“Whoop!” Feorie tripped and thudded on the ground.

“Ow...”

“All good?” said Alasdair.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she responded. She picked herself up from the ground. “My foot was caught in a rabbit hole.” Rubbing the toes on her left foot, she looked back at her previous steps. “Or something akin. It’s too dark to see.”

“For all the lights in the sky, it seems we still have want of illumination. Perhaps we could try the Dawnbringer again? Its glow might be brighter now that it’s darker out.”

Cweneira handed the knight her pale staff. “Hold this a moment then.” She reached around the back of her neck with both hands and untied Haulyd’s talisman. Without slowing her pace, she took back the staff, tied the Dawnbringer to it and struck the ground with the

bottom of the rod. The talisman clanged like a great bell as it bounced off the middle of the staff, the clamor echoing throughout the vast moonlit meadows. The tip glowed with the heat of the sun but emitted no far-reaching light; only the queen's hand was illuminated when she brought it within inches of the white-hot conduit.

“No such luck,” Cweneira said. She eyed the glowing tip. “Wait...”

Striking the grass with the bottom again, the talisman rebounded and rang out once more. The tip immediately lost its smoldering heat, becoming lukewarm as the echoing clang faded out across the grassy landscape. This time, the queen tied the talisman to the staff's tip before hitting the ground. Emitting a small chime as it ricocheted off the staff, the talisman performed the upstroke of its pendulous swing but not its downstroke. The Dawnbringer hung in the air, a lantern on its tether that shone with the bright light of the sun, illuminating everything around them for several meters.

Wielding the effulgence that lit the midnight meadows, Cweneira smiled at her companions. “Ah, the staff's middle gives the sun's heat while the tip gives its brightness. Truly does Haulyd chase away the night.”

“What providence!” Feorie exclaimed. “Your dream at the pit continues to guide us.”

“It may be owed to dreams, or perhaps inventiveness,” said Alasdair with a slight smirk, “but either way, I'll take it.”

“Wait, look over there.” Feorie pointed to a ridge of hills a few dozen meters to the east. “Do you see that passage between those two hills in the middle?”

“I didn't even see that entire ridge before,” Cweneira said, squinting.

“Yes, there's a well-traveled footpath leading to the space between those hills,” Alasdair proclaimed. “Do you think Haulydel is on the other side?”

A devilish grin came to Feorie's face. "There's only one way to find out."

"Oh, I know what that look means," Alasdair said with a wry smile. "You're not getting a head start this time!" He bolted for the hills.

"Hey, no fair!" Feorie cried as she took off after him.

Cweneira sighed, then hiked up her robes and gave chase. "Slow down, you two!" She held the luminous staff aloft. "You're not getting far without this!"

With flowing robes and clinking greaves, the Vicars and their knight raced headlong across the rolling fields, their furious pace rustling the grass with their swift, staccato steps. Feorie caught up to Alasdair and, with a mischievous smirk, aimed a push at his midsection. He dodged out of the way and lost speed; Feorie laughed teasingly as she sped ahead.

A sickly snap and a scream: Feorie collapsed and tumbled to the ground. She curled up on the grass, wailing and clutching her left foot.

"Fey!" Alasdair called out. He hastened to her side and dropped to his knees.

"Ahhhh fuck!" she shrieked behind clenched teeth.

"Let me see, Fey, move your hands!"

Shaking in agony, she withdrew her hands, setting strained fists on the grass. From knuckle to nail, her toes were dyed dark purple.

Cweneira caught up to them. "What's wrong?"

"Haste!" he cried. "Healing's Haste!"

"Oh god!" Her panicked grasp fumbled around the inside of her sleeves. "Here!" She whipped a vial out and passed it to him. "There may be a few drops left!"

He took the vial, set it down by his side and grasped Feorie's quivering foot. Removing his hunting knife from its sheath, he brought the blade to the bruised splotch and

made a small incision. A thin spurt of blood burst from the cut and flowed down off the side of her foot in a crimson trickle; Alasdair allowed the foul violet to drain from the bruise before he discarded the knife, uncorked Healing's Haste and tilted the bottle above the incision. Twin droplets escaped the vial and fell onto the wound, which lapped them up like rain on dry sand. The cut coagulated shut and the sickly color fled Feorie's toes. Her grunts of agony ebbed away to heavy breathing as she unclenched her jaw.

The knight offered her a hand. "Can you stand?"

"I hope so," she said, exhaling. She grabbed his calloused palm with her petite grasp and pulled herself up. Balancing herself against his profile, she stood on one leg as she lowered her left foot to the ground, slowly as if testing the surface of freezing water. The little Vicar winced and retracted her toe from the grassy earth; she tried again, planting her heel down instead. She stood tenuously as she removed her hand from Alasdair's firm hold, keeping the tip of her foot hovering above the ground.

"I'm afraid I'll need a crutch if I'm to walk with any speed."

The knight held out his spear. "Take this. And watch the tip." He turned to Cweneira. "Does she need a splint or a bandage of some sort?"

"No, there's no need. Her foot should be healed but some pain will linger." She stared off, her memory flashing back to Sulymeigh's death. "At least, that's how it ought to be..." Her brow furrowed.

Feorie began crutching forward. "Are you two ready? Hauludel still awaits."

"Oh." Cweneira watched her move at an uneven yet steady pace. "Yes, of course. Onwards."

Resuming their journey, the three of them approached the passage between the tall hills, their race having put them a dozen meters from the entrance. When they had crossed what little expanse of grassland remained and now trod on the dry patch of earth before the pass, Alasdair cut ahead of Feorie, unsheathed his iron blade and entered first. The knight headed the trio with sword brandished and the queen held her staff high to brighten the dusty path. They walked the winding road between the sloping walls of grass for several minutes before Alasdair stopped and pointed ahead.

“There! Do you see it?”

“Of course not,” Feorie said from behind him as she craned her neck. “Stop being so tall.”

The knight stepped forth to reveal the end of the passage and then laterally to reveal what lay ahead.

A mile away it lay, across their final expanse of grassland. Nestled in at the foot of the looming mountains behind it, the citadel stood tall against the backdrop of the Brightpeaks and the night sky, its granite towers glowing from the torches that lined the top of the surrounding ramparts, its tall curving walls blocking all but the highest structures from view. Firm in its foundations of earth and stone, Haulydel glinted against the guiding constellations above, its steeples and rooves gilded with pyrite, the pallid bastion of old still beaconing refuge for all manner of travelers who flee their dogged woes. White, grey and gold was the city of the sun god who had once led his disciples to the quarries of pale stone and shining metals in the mountains, and thus they readily founded the stalwart fortress to revere and station the brilliant deity who dispels the evils of the night.

“Damn,” said Feorie. “It’s bigger than I imagined.”

“Believe me,” Cweneira responded, “it’s even more impressive in the daylight.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“Just once in my youth.” The queen stepped forth onto the grass and the two others followed her toward the citadel. “I was just shy of a decade old when we rode here by royal carriage, my father and I, from Lewynel to visit the sun god himself.

“Sometime before, I told father of my early interest in becoming a Vicar, and although he supported my aspiration, he judged that only by meeting a god could I put it to a true test. Thus, for six days, my father would wake just before dawn and wait in the chapel for the sun to stretch its rosy fingers across the sky, whereupon he would prostrate himself in the light of the sunrise and pray for audience with Haulyd in his temple atop the Brightpeaks. By his account, when he turned to face the dawn on the seventh day, the peachy sun flared as it breached the horizon, blinding him momentarily and burning hazy splotches into his vision that formed intelligible words. The chapel then echoed with the voice of the sun god, who instructed my father to carve the text he beheld with his searing eyes onto the face of a gilded shield, and then, with the labor accomplished, bring it to Haulydel.

“We had our smith chisel the holy text onto a decorative gold-plated shield before we set out for the city of the sun, a three-day journey through the rocky passes of the Westpeaks and the great expanses of meadows thereafter. Soon, we arrived at the tall marble gates which we now approach, and at the gatekeepers’ request for a writ or proof of safe passage, my father stepped down from our horse-drawn carriage and held the gilded shield high above his head, whereupon the midday sun crested the looming walls of the city and lit the inscribed shield-face with its golden sunbeams. Laying eyes on radiant text, the gatekeepers hastened to open the marble doors for us, for we later learned that upon the shield my father had

written the Testament of Light, the sacred ode sung by the first settlers of Haulyd to give thanks for their god's life-giving radiance.

“With proof of Haulyd's invitation, we passed under the shadowed archway of the gate and into the protection of the stalwart walls before us. We strode through the army barracks that form the fortress's first line of defense, past the markets and homes of the city proper, and then to the very summit of the citadel where sits the gold-trimmed basilica at the base of the Brightpeaks. Entering the holy sanctuary, we were led by the High Cleric down the tawny-carpeted forum, past the pyrite altar and up the marble staircase in the back wall, the grand height of which we climbed arduously to arrive into the open air of the mountaintop. There, down the smooth stone path among the clouds, was the gleaming white temple of Haulyd, its pallid archway carved in the likeness of the rising sun, and there, under its tall painted ceiling past rows of nimbus white pillars, was the looming god himself, his smooth skin burnt black from eons of solar heat, the diamond chain around his ankle extending endlessly upwards toward the sun.

“But what haunts me still to this day, what causes me to shudder at the mere memory, was the tethered god's eyes, bright and sky-blue, staring down at me from across the mountain path. It was at that moment, the moment I met his divine gaze and took measure of the vast power behind those eyes, that I knew my life was in danger by merely standing in his presence, that I could have been so thoroughly destroyed inside and out if he so willed. I stopped short in my tracks, completely frozen and wide-eyed, for never before and never since have I so swiftly learned true fear.

“He said nothing. I said nothing. My father said nothing. I felt arrogant even looking at Haulyd, as if merely holding him in my mortal eyes was an unspeakable transgression to

be immediately punished. But punish me he did not, and spoke thus instead: 'Here, you shall have your audience. Speak as you will.' I turned to my father who told me to address him carefully, and so said I, 'My god, who are the provider of light and life, I have but one question: will I one day be queen and Vicar?' And he responded: 'My child, mistake not my words for prophecy, for even the Fivefold Creatrix herself cannot see the whole of time. But I tell you this, that I have watched you grow in your castle home from on high as I roll my shining burden across the sky, and I have measured your mettle and piety. You indeed have the makings of a queen on earth...' - Here I stood in amazement as twin tears streaked his cheeks - '...and just as I was to be chained to my timeless task, so too are you to be a servant of Matra. Strive to be divine, my child, but pray that you never become a deity yourself.'

“With that, he turned on his heel, bent low to exit his temple through the rear archway, and stepped up into the air as if climbing an invisible staircase, the sparkling chain following in his wake. We watched him ascend the cloudless sky, becoming smaller and smaller as he scaled the atmosphere, and soon averted our eyes from the blinding rays of the sun as Haulyd approached it. Having hung motionless in the air since our arrival, the radiant orb now resumed its lofty course as the god rolled it across the sky, his burden never to be abandoned overlong.

“Since then, for nigh on twenty-five years now, I’ve had to sit with his words, and ponder, only able to surmise their meaning. And now that we’re here, now that I stand with you before that fateful gate once more, I cannot rid this feeling that his words to me all those years ago will culminate somehow, and in the most terrible of ways.”

Their feet met dusty moonlit road. They came to a halt, their gaze traveling up the towering granite doors, the circular sigils of the sun god carved into their smooth surface, and

their eyes came to rest on the gate's looming arch with its pyrite parapets. They stood before the citadel in its outstretched torchlight for several seconds, Cweneira silent with dread and the Rockwellians speechless with wonder. An armor-clad watchman appeared atop the rampart, his polished helmet reflecting the orange glow, and called down to the three travelers.

“Who now comes before the sacred city?”

“A party of travelers, both royal and holy,” announced Cweneira. “Queen and Vicar Cweneira of Wry Dragael, Vicar Feoriga of Rockwell, and her honorable guard, Sir Alasdair.”

“So you claim,” the guard's responded. “What writ or proof have you?”

The queen held the staff before her and pulled the cord of the glowing talisman down from the tip to the middle; as the talisman lost its golden effulgence, the tip of the staff glowed white-hot with searing solar heat. “Behold the Talisman of the Dawnbringer,” she proclaimed, “the sacred conduit given by Haulydel's High Cleric following audience with your patron diety. Behold the proof of the sun god's assent!”

The watchman vanished under cover of the rampart. The clinking of the gate's mechanisms echoed throughout the night, and once stirred on their heavy hinges, the tall marble doors yawned open.

XI. At the Dawn of Bloodshed

They were met with a scene of dutiful vigilance. Beyond the wide aperture of the gate lay the first tier of the citadel, a wide expanse of training fields where looming watchtowers

of stalwart granite stood spaced throughout, each spire manned with armored archers and topped with pyrite roofing. Across the vast sun-dried terrain, the dusky grey soldiers' barracks stretched up toward the night sky, its windows completely dark if not for the candlelight flickering in those seated high in the top floor. As the Vicars and their knight passed under the gate's tall threshold into this first layer of fortification, a man in a pale-yellow tunic emerged from the nearest watchtower, his long blonde hair falling over the bow and quiver on his back, the sword at his hip clinking against his greaves. As he approached, they descried by the light of his torch the circular sigil of Haulyd emblazoned on his tunic and gauntlets, and as he met them on the dry field, he spoke in a rich baritone.

"Greetings, My Queen," he declared. "Sir Hortentius, Captain of the Sun's Guard, most honored to welcome you and your entourage into this illustrious city."

"The pleasantries are appreciated, good Sir Captain, but I'm afraid your introduction is wasted on me. Do you remember not our last encounter?"

"Of course, My Queen, my memory holds firm. How could I forget those fair features that have matured like fine summer wine?"

A soft smirk came across Cweneira's face. Feorie and Alasdair gave each other a look.

"As much as I'd love to exchange flatteries," the queen continued, "we must speak of grave matters. We have come out of urgent necessity and bear news of a terrible nature: Red Hell has come to Earth and likely plots something sinister."

Hortentius' grin fell away, replaced with a stony expression. "Do you suggest that the plague of darkness was Red Hell's Arrival? What was its purpose?"

The queen inhaled with a slight tremble in her chest. “Its purpose was to carry out a commission from Matra, namely to torment and kill King Sulymeigh, but the –”

“Oh, Cwen...”

“Please,” she uttered, imploring him with sorrowful eyes. She cut short the ensuing silence. “...but the aftermath left Wry Dragael and many other cities vacant, and we now have reason to believe that Red Hell plans to seize these cities for itself. The Oculuses it sent to occupy Wry Dragael drove us out onto the lam, so we sought out Hauludel for its army and fortifications. We have no way of knowing which kingdoms Hell has invaded or plans to invade if that indeed be its design, but since its sights could be set on Hauludel like any other kingdom, we must prepare for dread combat with the red denizens.”

“Any estimate as to their arrival?”

“Assuming Hell can deploy troops as quickly as they can their Oculuses, they might arrive at any moment. How soon can you ready your men?”

“Not soon enough.” Taking the bow from his back, he snatched an arrow from his quiver, nocked the projectile, and fired it at the eastern wall. The queen and her company watched it fly through the night air and strike a sizable bronze bell hanging low on the fortification, which let out a single echoing clang. Commanding shouts emanated from the tall barracks across the dry expanse, and the clamor of rousing soldiers soon followed. So too did the intermittent sentry towers become stirred to activity, and the jostling of armor and arrows was heard all around.

“Come with me,” Hortentius directed. “You are best protected by me and my men atop the gate.”

The captain started off towards the wide granite gate and the royal company followed, kicking up dust in their wake. As the looming stone doors groaned open on their heavy hinges, the soldiers of the Sun's Guard wearing weathered bronze armor poured out of the watchtowers and spread out in all directions with great urgency; here, those with bow and quiver ascended pallid staircases along the walls to man the ramparts, and there, others with spear and shield hastened through the gate to gather at the road to the city. Amid the buzz of the army's mobilization, the band of twin knights and Vicars strode up to a marble staircase nearest the yawning gate, and once limping Feorie handed Alasdair his spear and climbed up on his back, the captain led them up the smooth, wearied steps. As they ascended, they were passed by bronze soldiers marching single file to their stations, bows on their backs, longswords at their hips, each hilt sporting a Dawnbringer tied to the crossguard. By the time Cweneira and her entourage reached the top of the wall, nearly every meter of it was manned by the stalwart legionnaires of the Sun's Guard. A slight smile came to her as she indulged a glimmer of hope.

Hortentius apprised them as he led them along the pallid battlements. "Two days ago, our scouts bore news of a small group approaching from the north. Probably just vagabonds seeking asylum, but your report gives us no room for assumptions. If they indeed be enemies from Red Hell, we can afford no lack of preparation." Passing a line of hurried soldiers, they came to where they were to station, a distinguished rampart atop the city gate. Feorie slid off Alasdair's back and held onto his arm, hobbling as she craned her neck to see past the gilded parapet. Looking down over the edge of the wall, the queen watched the infantry amass far below her as foot soldiers spilled out from the gate to form ranks. Several rows thick, the army was fully assembled in the torchlight of the fortifications and now stood at the base of

the road that stretched into the darkness of the night. Cweneira turned her gaze upwards and peered out into the twilight fields.

“Do you see anything?” Feorie asked.

“...nothing.”

They stood for several moments trying to descry any movement in the inky blackness. Cweneira glanced to her left at Hortentius. The captain never took his eyes away from the void of the night.

“Any estimate as to their arrival?” the little Vicar asked.

“Could be a few moments, could be a few hours,” Hortentius responded, his gaze unwavering. “Probably less than a day is my guess.”

“Well, here’s hoping we have time.” Feorie took Alasdair’s spear back and crutched over to a parapet. Leaning her back against it, she slid down to a sitting position, let her head fall back on the marble barrier and closed her eyes. “Do what you will, but I’m retiring for the night. Wake me when there’s fighting to be done.”

“Good luck falling asleep in the sunrise,” said Hortentius. “Haulyd now approaches.”

A rosy ray of light pierced the horizon. The hues of the dawn steadily blossomed across the dark expanse of the night, warm watercolors spilling over a canvas of twinkling sky. Cweneira turned towards the east and watched as the sunrise yawned open upon the earth, bathing the cold summits of the Brightpeaks in golden sunbeams that slowly stretched down to the foot of their stony seats. Soon, all of Haulydel and the mountains it embraced were awash in the early light of the sun god, and the gleaming city of granite and gold shone with brilliant splendor. Cweneira followed the spreading dawn with her gaze as it cascaded down from the glittering temple at the highest tier of the city to the middle tier of tawny

houses and markets, then to the tall soldier's barracks at the bottom. The light of Haulyd reached across the dusty training field and past the city walls into the world beyond, coating all who stood on the ramparts in the waking dawn, illuminating the road to the citadel and the surrounding plains.

"What in the hell..." Hortentius squinted ahead into the distance. The queen followed his gaze to where a crimson-clad posse stood far off on the road.

"It's the Kin!" she cried. Feorie jolted up and turned to see. Alasdair stared ahead, brow knit.

"The Red Kin?" Hortentius said, and then immediately after: "Men, to arms! Arrows at the ready!" Swords rang out below as the army unsheathed iron. Arrows clinked all around as archers nocked their projectiles.

"No, stop!" Cweneira ordered. "Hold fire!"

"Hold!" the captain barked, then to the queen: "What for?"

"They'll be back from the dead! Red Hell will spit them back out as many times as we put them down, we must capture them..."

Words failed her as she watched the red-robed horde glint with points of light. Reflecting the shining rays of the dawn, their knives flashed as they stuck their own bellies and necks, carving crimson spouts into themselves that poured volumes of blood over the grassy plains. They collapsed to the ground, the red of their robes becoming indistinguishable in the spreading blood, a ruby well that expanded into a vast pool forty meters in diameter. Melting into the dark crimson before the queen's eyes, the bodies of the Kin slipped below the surface as the pool bottomed out into a red-rimmed abyss. Waves of blood crashed down

against the sinking walls of earth, a roaring cascade that echoed deep and hollow throughout the fields of Haulydel.

“The gate is open,” Hortentius said, red rivulets trickling down the edge of the pit. “And so our dread battle commences.”

They stood side by side on the black sand looking out over the flayed army: the Queen, the Bloodletter, and the profane prophet. To Vteskelr’s left stood Arcessendak of Ritual with his flowing robes and hair, and to his right stood Veruak the Impaler, crocodile skin armor on his four arms, the Hex of Bloodthirst upon his forehead. Warm waves of blood ebbed onto the dark shores behind the stoic horde of denizens, their gazes vacant with hypnosis, their heads likewise bearing the mark of Bloodthirst.

“Do you think it’ll suffice?” Vteskelr asked. Nose bleeding from the Fleshbane’s presence, he spoke past the red trickles that ran down his lips and chin.

“It’ll have to.” The Succubus Queen crossed her arms, nails dripping crimson on the dark sand. “I’ve reserved no forces and spared no expense.”

“Everything depends on the defenses we’re to overcome,” said Fleshbane. “If no ballistas or trebuchets man the walls of Haulydel, I could take on the Sun Guard’s unaided. The soldiers are an expense indeed, but a truly expendable one at that.”

“Such bold statements are often made by the prideful,” cooed the tongue of the Queen, “and pride often portends defeat.”

“Pride is merely confidence without forethought, and forethought is all we’ve entreated thus far.” The Bloodletter turned to Vteskelr. “Do you have it for me yet?”

“Indeed,” the prophet responded. He reached inside the sleeve of his gold-trimmed robes and produced a crimson blindfold, a near exact copy of the wrapping that veiled his own eyes. “Complete with Heat-Warding and All-Seeing Hexes,” he said, handing the blindfold to the man-beast. “What confidence have you in your plans for this particular item?”

“Measured confidence.” Fleshbane took the red wrapping and tied it around his wrist. “Haulyd may oversee all the affairs of Earth, but he sees nothing devised between Hell’s horizons. Have well-measured confidence in this ruse with me, my confreres, for upon the sun god’s death, I shall raise Red Hell to new heights.”

“If only the sun god’s death were the height of our ambitions,” the prophet responded. “Check your confidence, Bloodletter. It may be the only flaw in our designs.”

“Do you truly doubt me, Vteskelr?” Fleshbane cracked his neck.

“I doubt not, but rather advise. You would do well to be mindful of this, my confrere, that Haulydel may be the easiest battle ahead of us.”

The dark man-beast stared lidlessly at their armed forces. They remained motionless, their bodies glistening with raw flesh, every hand wielding a mace or warpick of dark blood-iron.

The sound of shifting sand arose behind them. The Titans and Muses turned and beheld a ridge of black dunes collapse on itself, falling away into a wide, yawning pit. Like revenants waking in their graves, the arms of the Red Kin shot up through the sinking earth, hands clutching the sides of the deep chasm to hoist themselves up into Red Hell. Having completed their pilgrimage of suicide, they ran off in all directions to delight in the promised land of flesh and flame.

“The gate is open,” said Vteskelr, “and so our campaign commences. Come with me, my Muses and my Queen, and let us dive first into the abyss and then the fateful fray! May the army of Hell follow Veruak across the fields of Haullydel, and may Arcessendak fly swiftly to the abyssal prisoner.”

The leader of the Muses jumped into the pit with the Succubus Queen and his two acolytes. Robes fluttering in the wind, they fell for several seconds through inky darkness before landing at the bottom of the abyss, unfazed by an impact that would have shattered mortal bones. From the depths, Vteskelr turned his eyes upwards past the edge of the chasm far above to see the morning sky of Earth colored peach with the fresh hues of the dawn, a bright day in its infancy. The prophet produced a crow-feather quill and black book from his robes, opened the tome, and scrawled a simple hex on the first blank page he found. After placing the quill on the open spell-book, the prophet raised his supine palm to the level of his chest; the hex flashed as the four of them left the ground and floated upwards, steadily ascending the well of darkness.

The hierophants of Hell breached the surface of the earth and found their field of battle laid bare before them: the gleaming city of the sun reflecting the dawn from its glittering rooftops; the wide panoply of archers stationed all along the top of its marble walls; the vast army of bronze-clad soldiers with stalwart spears and shields; and the weathered road to the city surrounded by emerald fields of grass. The Titans and Muses gazed upon this budding face of war as they hovered backwards in their ascent, putting the abyssal gate between them and the enemy. One slash through the hex from the prophet’s quill saw them slowly descend to the ground and another slash made the X that canceled the spell, dropping them to the earth.

Vteskelr turned to the Muse of Ritual. “Be on your way, Arcessendak, and await word that the battle is finished.” The Ritual Summoner nodded, his long locks bobbing a single time. Producing a quill and spellbook from his robes, he scrawled his own triangular hex into a blank page and closed the tome. He dissolved into the air as the pages thudded together, erasing his presence from the fields of Haulydel.

The Succubus cast her gaze to the city’s pallid ramparts. “No heavy munitions in sight. Shall we summon Fleshbane?”

Vteskelr’s blindfold flashed with its All-Seeing Hex. “No. For some reason, I cannot see into the city. Haulydel has always had the protection of earthly forces, but we now know it has divine protections in place to ward off infiltration. Without knowing what awaits us inside the city, the Bloodletter must bide his time lest he breaches the city gates and finds war machines ready to crush him.”

From far off atop the wall of the shining citadel, a rich baritone voice barked orders. Arrows nocked, the archers bent their bowstrings back.

The Succubus’ eyes widened. “Haste, Vteskelr.”

“Have faith, my comely comrade.”

The prophet turned to a blank page in his spellbook. He started on a new hex with his quill as the archers released their bowstrings, letting loose a swarm of arrows into the air. His scrawling now complete, Vteskelr pocketed his pen as the barrage loomed overhead. He opened his tome, turned it toward the plummeting storm of projectiles, and released a storm of his own.

Black clouds burst from the glowing hex, a whirlwind of wispy darkness whose skyward rush scattered the arcing arrows in their swift course, and the projectiles rained

down all around them. Even after the last arrows landed, the jet stream of inky fog continued to bellow forth, its dark tendrils climbing high into the air and condensing into black thunderheads. Crimson lightning crackling deep within the swirling blackness, the spreading storm stretched over the battlefield and cast everything between the gates of Hell and Hauldel in its long shadow. As the archers of the Sun's Guard readied another volley, the first droplets of blood loosened from the dark clouds above and fell to earth, giving way to a sprinkling ruby shower that crescendoed into a violent downpour of red. The road to the citadel became a marsh of dark mud in the maelstrom that now coated the army in exsanguination, causing screams to erupt from even the most hardened soldiers. With the whip of the fierce winds and the crushing sheets of blood-rain, the volley of arrows loosed from atop the wall plummeted prematurely or were blown off course, leaving the hierophants of Hell unscathed at the foot of the abyss.

The rushing breeze blew through the Succubus's hair as they stood at the edge of the storm, lifting her long braid from her back. The warm cherry rain spattered her from foot to shin as she uncurled her snake tongue. "It is time." Holding out her left arm and clenching her fist, the Egg-Birthing Hex tattooed on her forearm flashed green, and the root of her snake-tongue swelled with a living egg that she pushed to the front of its fanged maw. She spat it out into an open palm, the viscous squirming vessel that hatched a winged arachnid in her hand. The Queen allowed the newborn to scuttle about her digits for several seconds before casting it into Hell's black gate, the buzz of its wings becoming a fading echo as it floated down through the depths. Half a minute passed before the buzz returned, now accompanied by the shuffling of limbs and clinking of iron. Countless hands of raw flesh gripped the rim of the abyss on all sides as the spidery herald flew back to the Succubus, and

the skinless soldiers pulled themselves up onto the fields of Haulydel, breaching the threshold between Earth and Red Hell. Denizen after denizen poured out of the black pit, its curving walls swarming with the ascending horde, and soon the army of Hell had fully assembled before the chasm that had birthed it. Standing in the blood-storm, the multitude of soldiers became glazed in the ruby downpour, the Bloodthirst Hex on their foreheads glowing ceaselessly, the pale skin of their faces painted scarlet one drop at a time.

The battalions amassed, Veruak passed between the ranks to stand before them in the raging storm, allowing himself to be drenched in blood. The many-armed Muse faced the army of skinless, hypnotized denizens and drew his four javelins of dark iron from his back. “As was once written by the great prophet,” he bellowed over the downpour, “strain every vein in your arms, my comrades, and unleash your flaming wrath against her! For today, we fight against the designs of the cruel Creatrix, she of the malevolence that keeps us hideous in the eyes of men. Pave the Bloodletter’s path with the ruin of the Sun’s Guard and fear not their mortal arms, for the blood we have been condemned to revel in now sustains us without end, the red rain above now hails our liberation! Be at my back all you sons of suffering, you daughters of damnation, and you will find amid the fateful fray your long-forborne freedom!”

The Muse turned on the spot in the clamor of the cheering denizens to face the Sun’s Guard from afar. He dug his heel into the dark mud, charged through the scarlet shower, and became a roaring banner for the army that stampeded behind him.

XII. The Battle for the Brightpeaks

They stood upon the ramparts, the Vicars and their knight, surrounded by the staccato of arrows released and ambient rainfall, eyes assailed by the horrid host of Hell and the hemorrhaging sky. Dry as she was, Cweneira could have soaked her hand in the red cascade had she leaned over the parapet and held an arm aloft. Dozens of meters away, the four-armed berserker and his raw-muscled army were quickly closing the gap, their war cries growing louder as they barreled through the shower of blood.

“Hold firm, men!” Hortentius roared over the torrential storm. “Dig your shields into the mud and heat your iron!” His blood-coated spearmen raised their pikes as one, displaying a Dawnbringer at the mid-shaft before they stuck the bottom into the earth. A mighty gong roared throughout the army as the talismans rebounded off their long weapons, pointed tips glowing with white-hot iron that sizzled and steamed in the blood rain. Splashing burgundy on their greaves as they planted their shields into the muck, the soldiers gazed past the scarlet rivulets dripping down their visors and watched the towering Impaler come into view through the sheets of rain. Their arms shook as they held fast to their tall protections.

“Hold...”

Less than a stone’s throw away from Hell’s army.

“Hold!”

Mere meters between the two hosts.

“Attack!”

The armies collided. While Cweneira watched from on high, Veruak leapt for the nearest soldier as the Sun’s Guard thrust their pikes forward as one. The Muse deflected a half dozen jabs with a single airborne swipe and landed on his target, pushing the spearman to the ground. As he held his prey down and put his first javelin through the windpipe,

another soldier plunged a smoldering pike through Veruak's scaly armor and into his clavicle, piercing through his back and exiting near his shoulder blade. Straining with the pain, the Muse turned his agony into a swift reaction; he gripped the shaft of the pike that transfixed him and shoved a second javelin into his assailant just above the Adam's apple. The pointed tip tore through the tongue at the root and came out the top of the soldier's cranium, piercing into him so thoroughly that two feet of the javelin exited the skull and lifted the helmet from his gushing head. Eyes wide, Cweneira grimaced as the Impaler's victim collapsed where he stood, his gaping head bubbling with exsanguination. The shaft in his shoulder now released from mortal grasp, Veruak put his remaining javelins down, gripped the dead soldier's pike with four hands, and pulled it from his body with the strength of two men. The sky's baptism of blood took conjoined effect with the glowing hex on his head, for the several drops that filled the hole in his shoulder coagulated together to seal the wound.

Cweneira averted her eyes as Veruak retrieved his weapons and dived back into the warring ranks. She cast her gaze throughout the fields of dread battle below, and everywhere she looked, the men of the Sun's Guard dropped faster than Hell's warriors. All along the front lines, the skinless denizens hooked the soldiers' shields with their war picks and pulled their protections to the ground, whereupon their mace-wielding comrades would strike the staggered soldiers with brutish force and break bones through their armor. Just behind these sorry soldiers, the second line of infantry would thrust their spears into the attacking denizens as the men in front of them were cut down, but as many times as they stabbed a gut or leg or throat, the raining blood would flow down into the wound and heal it in an instant. The Sun Guard's made pin cushions of Red Hell's army with their pikes and arrows, but still the

raw-muscled warriors battered the front lines unfazed, slowly advancing towards the gate of Haulydel as they cut their way through the gilded army.

“They can’t be felled!” Cweneira cried. “What kind of unholy arts can conjure an unstoppable horde?”

“Look closer,” said Alasdair. She could barely hear him over the screams and clashing iron. “Do you not see the fallen enemies?”

She peered down at the bodies on the battlefield. A scarcity of deceased denizens did indeed litter the dead, their corpses plugged with arrows all over.

“Multiple wounds put them down?”

“Not necessarily,” said Feorie. “Look there.” The little Vicar pointed to an isolated duel between a soldier and a denizen. Having knocked the hellspawn to the ground, the spearman had jammed the pointed bottom of his shield into the enemy’s mouth, pinning it down by the mandibles as it bit the iron edge. Several times over, he stabbed the bloody being in the torso just below its thinly fleshed ribcage, but still the denizen flailed its dark maces and kicked aimlessly, its vision blocked by the slab of steel in its jaws. In its wild thrashing, the skinless humanoid managed to land a forceful blow on the soldier’s shin guard; the Vicars and their knight watched him fall to his knees while the denizen wrenched the shield out of its mouth. Lower jaw dangling from ruptured cheeks, the hellspawn picked itself off the ground and stood over the wounded soldier, casting a long shadow upon him with its back to the morning sun. The denizen raised its twin bludgeons for the killing stroke, but the soldier reacted sooner and thrust his sizzling spear into its left breast. Piercing its heart, the pulsing organ tore open in the denizen’s chest, blood spurting from the sinews of its

ribcage. After yanking the spear tip free from its ribs, the soldier's enemy collapsed and perished on the ground, laying face-down in the burgundy mud.

“They heal unless stabbed through the chest,” Cweneira observed.

Feorie knit her brow. “Perhaps vital organs are their vulnerability?”

Alasdair unslung his bow and nocked an arrow. Bending the bowstring back, he aimed for a tall denizen in the rear ranks and fired. The arrow flew for the head, but the roaring rain beat down on the projectile with its thick droplets, causing it to drop early and pierce the denizen through the base of the throat. The warrior staggered, spat blood and pulled the arrow out. “Shit,” Alasdair said as he nocked another arrow, aiming higher than before. He released as his target cast the first missile to the ground, the second landing in its forehead above the left eyebrow. The denizen immediately went limp, fell forward and moved no more.

“Dead before they can heal!” the knight exclaimed. He turned to Hortentius standing a dozen paces to their left. “Captain!”

“No need to repeat, sir knight,” he responded, then shouted down to his soldiers: “Aim for the head and chest! Front line: cast your spears into the enemy and two-hand those shields. Dig your heels in and stop them in their tracks! Second line: stab the brain, stab the heart, give them no chance to rally! Kill quickly lest they recover!”

As the pick-wielding denizens struggled to pull shields down, the front line threw their pikes into the crowd at high trajectories, hoping for a fortuitous headshot. They gripped their tall protections with both hands, resisting the pull of the war picks with greater effect, and either yanked their shields back to rip the picks from their wielders' grasp or shoved them forward to bash their assailants to the ground. With several denizens locked in a

tug-of-war with the front line, the second line aimed their glowing spears and pierced the hellspawns' heads; likewise, the shield-bearers raised their iron aegises over the denizens they knocked supine and plunged the pointed foot of the shield into their chests.

“Keep going, men! Push them back and reclaim the ground they took from you!”

Digging their boots into mud and viscera, the soldiers began trudging forward against the enemy, the front line blocking all onslaught while the second line thrust their pikes past the shoulders of the shield-bearers. Facing the army's wall of iron, Veruak fell back into Hell's horde, his comrades rushing forth to challenge the advance of the gilded soldiers, and he peered through the scarlet storm to scan the top of the wall. His eyes fell upon the distinguished captain with his waves of blonde hair and watched the man shout his baritone orders. His target identified, the Muse of battle narrowed his eyes, lifted a javelin over his head with two hands, and launched the weapon with the force of a towering ballista; truly can Red Hell afford such immense power to a worthy few.

Ripping through the air, the Muse's harpoon sailed over the two armies and reached its target in a fraction of a second. Barely having time to react, Hortentius had just begun to flinch away before the projectile tore through his left ear and flew by. Half a kilometer from Haulydel's gate, the javelin rocketed into the dry ground at the foot of the army barracks, an impact that threw dust and dirt into the air.

“Get down!” Hortentius cried. Blood dripped between his fingers as he clutched his mangled ear. He hit the deck and the parapet next to him exploded. As the Vicars and their knight dropped to the ground, another javelin pierced the wall with such force that the pyrite of the parapets ignited and blasted its stony seat into rubble. The archers standing on the crumbling crater fell from the wall along with the ruined marble, raining rocky chunks and

screaming bodies down upon the Sun's Guard below. Every smoldering spear the Muse snatched from the dead and cast with his deadly arms blew out a section of Haullydel's high wall, both chipping away at the protections of the bowmen and crushing the back line of the army with falling marble. As the Muse besieged the gleaming fortifications, Hell's host roared and rallied before their four-armed champion. Pushing back against the wall of shields, the denizens leapt onto the shield-bearers and struck them in the helms with savage force, either concussing the soldiers with their blunt bludgeons or piercing through to the skull with their picks. With the front line now falling away and the rear crushed beneath eroding marble, the gilded forces began inching backwards toward Haullydel's gate as they struggled to repel the renewed assault.

“Archers...” Hortentius tried to rise to all fours amid the dust and rubble. Another harpoon rocketed into the wall a meter away from him, spewing shards of rock all around. Still on the ground a dozen paces away, Cweneira pulled her white staff out from under Feorie, who had fallen on top of it. “What are you doing?” Feorie hissed, pure anxiety from dry lips. The queen coughed as she wiped her chalky fingers on her robes and tied the First Aegis to the middle of the staff. She rose to her hands and knees and began crawling over to the captain with the pallid rod.

“Cwen!” Alasdair cried. He flung out a hand flecked with scrapes and grabbed her foot.

“Let go! I have to –”

“I know. Just wait until the next missile has flown lest you're speared through as you stand. Time yourself between shots and you just might save him.”

She nodded and he released her. Crossing a length of debris, she scraped her way through dust and shards of rock before coming to a huddle beside the captain.

“Cwen, you need to flee! Take your company and rush back to the barracks!”

“Shh! Just wait...”

Several seconds passed, the sound of clashing iron filling the dead air. An archer hunched behind a nearby parapet sprang up to fire an arrow and quickly squatted back down. His shelter burst into flying particles, and once the dust settled, he lay still with a gaping hole in his chest, the spear having ripped through him in an instant.

“Now, captain! On your feet!” She rose to a knee and struck the ground with the staff. The tethered talisman clanged off the white rod, resounding deep throughout the battlefield. The pearlescent bubble formed around the two as Hortentius picked himself up from the debris. “I should have guessed a Vicar would safeguard a talisman.” He turned to address the archers. “Everyone, retreat! Fall back and holster your bows. Keep your blades at your hip and assemble to hold the gate closed. Your comrades down below need your aid!” The last word leaving his lips, Cweneira turned toward the battlefield and stared down an inbound missile. She gasped and flinched away, but the bubble shield had already nullified the projectile, erasing it from tip to bottom as it struck the shimmering surface.

The archers now hurried back down the wall to the training ground, their boots hammering the marble steps as they descended the stairs. “Come, Cwen!” The captain drew his sword. “We must collect your company.” Keeping the staff between them like a parasol in the rain, the queen held fast to the Aegis as they dashed across the rampart to where the Rockwellians lay. She struck the ground with the staff and the divine shield dissipated with an echoing clamor; Feorie and Alasdair rose to their feet, the little Vicar crutching on his

spear, and they came to the queen's side. She struck the rampart again and the resounding gong formed the bubble around the four of them.

Alasdair dropped to a knee within the shining protection and beckoned Feorie. Handing back his spear, she clambered up onto his back with strained difficulty as she held her broken foot aloft. With Cweneira maintaining the godly Aegis around them, the group took off down the marble rampart, passing through the scattered ruins of the parapets and sidestepping the bloodied bodies of archers. The relentless blasts from Veruak's assault rang out behind them as they descended the pallid stairs, and once they reached the bottom, Cwen dispersed the Aegis on the barren training field among the archers who had survived the Muse's onslaught. Now assembling at the towering gate, these remnants of the Sun's Guard pressed themselves against the vast granite doors, holding them closed with the strength of their arms and the friction of their heels.

Hortentius turned to the Vicars and their knight. "Look at me, my harried guests, and hear me well: you must now flee to the soldiers' barracks and find the kennels where our dogs are caged. Fling open every door along the way so the hounds will have passage to the training grounds once you free them. They know their way, so mind you not to lead them back here, but rather hasten to reach the top floor of the barracks where you'll find entrance to the middle tier of the city. Go forth from there to the wall of the highest tier and find the staircase leading up to the chapel. Do this and you might just live. And Cwen..."

A brief pause.

"I'm sorry...for us, for all this, for everything. I'm so sorry, Cwen."

He turned, indulging a lingering gaze for a moment before racing away toward the gate. Feorie looked up at Dragaelic queen, her royal brow tinged with sorrow.

“...Cwen?”

“Let’s go,” said Alasdair.

The queen tore her gaze away from the captain’s dwindling profile. Her eyes never left the ground as she joined her companions in flight, kicking up dust as they ran across the training field. Passing by the marble guard towers, the clamor of battle lessened as they left the tall gate further behind. They were mere meters from the tall, dark barracks when the battering of Haulydel’s vast doors reached their ears, a deep intermittent echo that rang out through the barren expanse.

Passing by the first of Veruak’s spears where it stood lodged in its crater, they stopped before the musty wooden door of the soldier’s quarters. Feorie tapped Alasdair on the shoulder; the knight dropped to a knee to let her slide down from his back and he handed over his spear as she gained her footing.

“Cwen, you’ve navigated the barracks before, correct? When you first visited Haulydel?”

The queen stared off.

“Cweniera, look at me.”

She gazed skyward instead. “I just...oh god.” Her eyes fluttered as the air dried her budding tears. Several moments passed as she quashed the ever-familiar burden of true love deferred, and her company abided. Indeed, some sorrows will last a lifetime.

She accepted it. Her sadness fleeing in the face of determination, she narrowed her brow and turned her gaze to the knight, new resolve forming within her. “Yes...yes, I will navigate us through the barracks. You’ll go first in case we’re met with any enemies, then Feorie second, and I’ll direct us from the rear.”

“Well noted, my queen.” He drew his sword and grasped the iron door handle.

“Wait.” Feorie turned her ear quizzically. “Do you hear that?”

Alasdair paused, his hand lingering on the handle. “You mean the army battering down the front gates? Awfully hard to miss.” His thumb clicked the lock.

“No, stop!”

He retracted his hand. “What’re you on about, Fey?”

“Don’t open that door! There’s something on the other side, can’t you hear it? A faint rustling or shifting all along the wall, as if there’s movement on the other side.”

The knight pressed his ear to the door. “It’s slight, but it’s there. What the hell am I hearing?”

He moved slowly toward a window in the barrack wall, cautiously measuring his steps. Feorie drew her dagger, its talisman hanging down the back of her fingers.

Alasdair peered through the glass into the dark building. “The floor’s moving?” He squinted, then his eyes opened wide.

“Run,” he said in a low voice, slowly backing away.

Feorie, quizzical: “Sorry, what?”

A chorus of hisses came through the window.

“Run!”

He turned on his heel as the glass shattered. Scaly green erupted from the barracks as waves of snakes poured out over the windowsill, their top and bottom jaw both sporting a pair of eyes and fangs. The Vicars screamed and turned tail; Alasdair rushed Feorie and snatched her up as she tried to hobble away on his spear. The ground now vibrating with the rising flood of serpents, the knight tried to throw the little Vicar over his shoulder and tripped

on the crater made by the Muse's spear. He fell into the excavation and Feorie tumbled away, flinging the spear out of arm's reach as she hit the dry earth. "Fey!" Raw and harried, his cry rang out to her as she stuck her dagger into the earth, and its talisman bounced off the blade. He glimpsed a visage of wide-eyed fear before her form vanished.

The snakes of the Succubus at her heels, Cweneira sprinted over to Alasdair and struck the ground with her staff as she skidded to her knees. The pearly sphere encapsulated them, decapitating the serpents that were nearly upon them and bisecting the torrent of scaly green.

His precious ward gone, the bubble shook as the knight bellowed her name.

XIII. The Duel of Heaven and Hell

Vteskelr and the Succubus stood speechless before the black rift. Their forces having cut down the remaining soldiers of the Sun's Guard, the Titans watched the skinless denizens throw themselves against Haulydel's doors as the light of the morning pierced through the bleeding clouds in a single focused sunbeam. Bathed in white radiance, their denizens' raw muscles glistened as the red rain above them dispersed, the heavenly ray widening to twain the storm and scatter it to the winds. Without the roar of the downpour, the battering of the marble gates echoed clear throughout the fields as the crimson horde repeatedly battered the vast doors to the city.

"Damn it to Hell!" Vteskelr seethed. "Our meticulous designs thrown in the shitter!"

“We can afford it.” The Succubus put hands to hips. “Haulyd acted much too late. We’ve already breached the city and the sun god has a fraction of an army with which he can greet us. We can withstand their forces without our Bloodthirst.”

“You’re missing the point! Had Haulyd acted sooner, this oversight could have cost us our entire coup. What other factors are at work here that we failed to anticipate?”

The fields echoed with the siege one final time before the gates cracked open. The first few denizens trickled in before the horde flung the doors wide, and with their morale renewed, they hacked at any gilded soldier they encountered with fierce brutality.

“Inevitable,” the Succubus stated with a grin. “Shall we call the Bloodletter?”

“Do you see any war machines?”

“See for yourself.” The tattooed hex on her forearm glowed green and her snake-tongue swelled with a rolling bulge once again. She spat a sizeable egg into her hand and tore the shell away to reveal a stillborn chick, its thin feathering wet with birthing fluid. She offered the hatchling to the prophet.

“Red-tailed hawk?” he asked as he took the bird from its eggshell casket.

“Golden eagle,” she replied. “They have better eyes.”

Vteskelr eyed the bird in his palm for a moment before curling his fingers around its cold body. He pinched the base of its limp neck with his other hand and plucked its head from its shoulders, decapitating the chick as if pulling a weed by the roots. Discarding the bony torso, he held the head in the vice of his fingers as he produced his black quill and slipped the tip behind its dark eyes, gouging them from their sockets with surgical precision. The prophet discarded the head in turn, eagle eyes now laying in his hand like twin marbles.

He lifted one side of his red blindfold to expose a vacuous socket and palmed the tiny spheres into the hole. The bird's eyes orbited around each other in his head, a slow yet continuous clockwise motion. He gazed through the aperture of Haulydel's gates from afar.

"No ballistas or trebuchets in the back," he reported. "And if they had any off to the sides, they would be using them against our troops presently. But our forces are only met with infantry."

"Let's get on with it, then." The Succubus had already birthed a winged spider. She cast in into the pit and watched it flutter down through the blackness.

"Would you check your impatience just once? Is there no more crucial time for it?"

"Look, I understand that Haulydel's little stunt has given you a good scare, but the ball is already rolling. Just how long do you think the Oculuses can hold Matra at bay? And can you be sure even now that she isn't on her way? Time is against us, my compeer, and we know not how much sand remains in the hourglass."

Having faded out as the Titans spoke, the buzzing of the messenger's wings returned, bringing with it the sound of swift, lumbering limbs. The arachnid flew up from the pit and landed on the Succubus' shoulder almost simultaneously with the hulking black hands that shot up and gripped the edge of Hell's gate. Obsidian horns glinting with the dawn as they emerged from the darkness, Fleshbane hoisted himself up into the world of Earth in one fluid motion, fingers digging into the soft soil. With the sun gleaming upon the hexes etched into his dark muscles, his aura began bleeding his two comrades as he rose to his feet and breathed in the bright atmosphere.

"The air has lost its sweetness." He turned his lidless gaze to the peachy sky.

"When were you last on Earth?" the Succubus asked.

“This is the first time since my death and damnation. Where’s the rain?”

Vteskelr interjected. “Haulyd dispersed it with his rays. Since he’s aware of our siege, my estimate is that he’s left the sun where it is and awaits confrontation in the summit temple. Do you know what this means?”

“Don’t ask when you can just say it, and quickly at that.”

“It means we know not what we’re up against! Who knows what kind of tricks the Haulyd has for us!”

“Calm yourself, prophet. Let me be the one who concerns himself with Haulyd’s tactics, and you only need worry about this,” he held up his wrist to display the All-Seeing blindfold tied to it. “Pray to the Four Hells that your hexes hold. One slight misspelling could be lethal.”

“Do you truly doubt me, Fleshbane?”

The Bloodletter grinned. “Touché. Anything else?”

“Just one last piece of advice. I was unable to see into the citadel with my All-Seeing Hex, so expect not your Bloodletting or pestilence to work within the high walls. Force of arms may be your only option.”

Curling his hands into fists, Fleshbane bent low and put his knuckles to the ground.

“No matter. If the sun god wants a battle of brawn, then he shall have it. Be at ease while you await my return, dear comrades, for next time we meet I shall be made anew.”

The wide hex on his back facing the sky, his rippling muscles tensed as he primed himself on all fours like a runner before the starting flag. Lasered in on the wide gates of Haulydel, he flew into motion, bounding through the city’s road on fists and feet like an ape. His shins and forearms became caked in blood and viscera as his limbs pounded through the

aftermath of the battle, and he sped past Veruak as the Muse pulled the choicest parts of the bodies to string together his next gruesome ensemble. The battlefield all around the stampeding Bloodletter became a feast for his aura, for the bodies in his vicinity bled anew from their gaping gashes.

The horned behemoth barreled through the wide-open gates of marble. The fighting between soldier and denizen scattered to the dust as the Titan burst through the brawling mob and tackled the first of the Sun's Guard he encountered. He and his victim rolled together with the explosive momentum and, careening to a halt, he landed on top of the soldier, pinning his victim down with his weight as he palmed his helmeted head and crushed it with his hulking hand. Twisted bronze and cranial pulp burst out from between his dark fingers, turning the soldier's head into a smashed pumpkin atop the stump of the neck. He released his grip and flicked the entrails from his hand, and rising from the ruins of his victim he sauntered onwards, leaving the fighters behind him to cower at the man-beast that had spared them.

A dozen dusty paces later, Fleshbane turned his sights forward. His ears had picked up the torrent of slithering and hissing, and he turned his bloodshot eyes up from the ground to descry the Succubus' horde of snakes washing over the training grounds in the distance, the venomous flood bending around the granite watchtowers as it cascaded toward him.

He stalwarted his stance and braced himself.

The green wave rolled over his feet and swept all around him. He felt the whip of the riptide as the rushing scales sliced at his ankles, but they could not cut through his leathery skin, leaving only dull streaks on his feet like a blade against whetstone. As he stood amid the surge, the hissing inundation reached the fighting stragglers at Haulydel's gates and

washed over them, making pin cushions of the Sun Guard with their fangs. Fleshbane heard their shrieks as they succumbed to the paralyzing poison. He continued his pace, sliding his feet across the ground so as not to crush his fanged allies. Reaching the end of the scaly tide, he approached the last watchtower before the soldier's barracks, and after rounding the granite spire, he stopped in his tracks, furrowing his brow at the scene before him.

In front of the spear lodged in the center of its crater, Cweneira and Alasdair were knelt on either side of Feorie who lay pale and shaking between them, her ankles flecked with cuts and dotted with fang marks. The knight's head hung low as he clutched the little Vicar's limp hand, his bow and sword on the ground next to Feorie's dagger. Cweneira hastened to empty her vial of Healing's Haste into her palm, and after rubbing it all over her hands like a salve, she placed her glossy hands at the bottom of Feorie's shin and massaged her foot from ankles to toes, drawing out blood and tawny venom with each stroke.

The behemoth Titan sauntered toward them. Cweneira turned her head toward the sound of his footsteps and froze. Alasdair snatched up his bow and jumped to his feet. He nocked an arrow and aimed for Fleshbane's forehead, holding the bent bowstring taut.

"Stop there!"

Fleshbane stood still, curiosity evinced by a tilt of his head. "Who are you?"

"I'm the one who asks the questions here. What the hell are you and what do you want?"

Fleshbane took a single step forward and Alasdair fired. The arrow bounced off his dark forehead. "You can leverage no threat over me," the Titan said as he continued towards them. Priming his bow once more, Alasdair aimed for a bloodshot eye and released the arrow. The Titan snatched it out of the air mid-flight and snapped it in his grasp. "Yours is

not the garb of Hauydel, is it? From whence do you hail?" He came to a stop, standing a dozen paces away from them.

"Rockwell." Feorie spoke from the ground, now restored to a healthy complexion. The wounds on her ankle slowly closing, she dragged herself back a comfortable distance from the horned man-beast. "Rockwell and Wry Dragael. Please have pity on us, we are but humble Vicars of Matra and our homes lie in ruin! We have no quarrel with you, so please just spare us!"

"Vicars of Matra?" he growled, jaw clenched with flaring rage. "Servants of the cruel Creatrix?" Cweneira stepped back. Alasdair picked up his blade and pointed it at the Titan with a white-knuckled grip. Eyes wide, he placed himself between the towering creature and his wards.

Fleshbane's demeanor softened. "Victims of her cruel commands, and my comrades in suffering. You may find it hard to believe, but I have no true quarrel with you nor the sun god I seek to duel. We would be allies, in fact, if only you could see Matra for her true colors, so let me advise you. You will not stop me. You will not slow me. You can follow me to the summit temple if you wish, but do not think you have any power to change what is to come."

He continued his pace, circumventing the trio to head for the soldier's barracks. They watched him push the wooden door open, duck his massive profile under the doorframe and disappear into the interior.

Leaning on Alasdair's spear, Feorie picked herself up from the ground. "Well, what do we do now?"

Several seconds elapsed before Cweneira spoke. "I think we follow."

“Are you mental?” Alasdair replied. “He intends to take on Haulyd! Who knows what fallout will follow their battle! We need to flee as far as possible.”

“My point exactly, the consequences of their battle could be disastrous. Suppose the behemoth defeats the sun god; what then? Do you think he would don the diamond shackle to continue the sun’s course? There’s no chance he would take up an assignment from Matra. If he were the victor, the sun could tumble backwards below the horizon and eternal night would befall us. Our only choice is to try to change the tide of the duel.”

“What if there’s nothing we can do? Or what if the sun stays where it is even if Haulyd falls in battle?”

“Can we afford to be wrong in either event? Come now, my good knight, we must act.”

Alasdair said nothing. His brow furrowed and his gaze remained fixed on the queen. “Shit,” he sighed.

“I know, Al. It’s a heavy decision but we must strive for the best possible outcome, even though its chances be slight.”

“No, I don’t think you do know. I don’t think you realize how conflicted this makes me, because this ultimately falls on my shoulders. We do need to intervene, but who is the only one among us suited to intervene in battle? I am all but certain to die if we go to the summit temple, and frankly I’ve never been so scared in all my years. I’ve just stared into the jaws of death and saw my reflection in its obsidian teeth. Indeed, I’ve approached death before to protect my wards, but never has death been so close and so assured, as if its cold breath now condenses on my neck.”

He paused. “But just as starkly do I realize the honor of falling in a spectacular battle between divinities. I’ve known men more reckless than I who would dream of such a glorious end, and truly, there is no more noble task for a man of my guild...But at the same time, though, there is truly no greater fear than death at the hands of Hell. So as I said, I can’t help but be conflicted...” He paused, contemplation writ on his face. “But as you said, we’ve no other choice.”

He looked down at the sword in his hands. Holding the hilt in his right hand and the flat blade in his left, Alasdair turned it once over before sheathing it at his hip, eyes downcast. Feorie picked up her dagger from where it had laid next to the knight’s sword, and after sheathing the blade, she unfastened the belt that held it and offered the garment to him. “And as you once said, this doesn’t have to be a death sentence. Bounce the talisman off the dagger’s pommel and approach the battle undetected. Hell’s champion diverted only the arrow you shot at his eye, so that must be his vulnerability. Plunge my blade into his pupils and retreat.”

Alasdair took the belt and brandished the dagger. The talisman of Selvra’s Eclipse hung down his fingers and hovered just beside the pommel.

“This approach just might work,” he said. “Slip in and slip out.”

“It’s worked for me in the past and I have no doubt that it’ll work for you now.” She crutched closer as he sheathed the dagger and fastened the belt to his waist. “Listen, Al. I know that risking your life is part of your charge as a bodyguard, but I want you to know that I see the toll it takes on you. I’ve seen the sorrow in your eyes, the same sorrow I see now, and I can’t help but imagine it belies...a sense of worthlessness, perhaps, that your vocation

has fostered in you, that you feel expendable. Relentlessly expendable because the life of your ward will always take priority over your own.

“But I want you to know that you’re so much more than a bodyguard to me, because before I met you, I’d never known such unwavering selflessness. You would always give me your cloak no matter how harsh the storm. You gave me your morsels when your belly was empty, you gave me the last of our water when your lips were dry. And now here we stand on the edge of what could be an endless night, and still you continue to give, even when I have spent through all your gifts. I would be broken if not for you. I would be crawling on my belly right now if not for you. I have no cloak, no food, no water, not even a home anymore. I have nothing. Nothing without you. And here at the end of everything, I need nothing more.” She hugged him tight. “You’re not expendable, Al. Not to me. You’re my most trusted friend and companion and I will always love you.”

Stunned, the knight stood with arms up as she held him. A moment passed before he let his hands fall around her, returning her embrace as his eyelids fluttered. “You can play a heartstring like a harp, little one.” He closed his glistening eyes, a sense of final peace settling into his expression. “My most beloved ward.” The knight planted a single kiss on the top of her head and held her still, content with her warmth.

At length, he released her. “Now let us make haste, my sweet compeers. The fate of Haulyd rests in our hands.” He drew his sword and turned his eyes to the mountain summit far above. “Come with me to the peak of this shining city” he stated, “for the brilliant god of light, and for your proud patron Goddess.”

Wielding his sword, Alasdair followed the Bloodletter’s dusty footprints to the door of the towering barracks and opened it for his companions. “We’ve ordered our procession,

and now we keep to it. Cwen, you're to lead us." The queen strode forth, Feorie following, and activated the lantern of the Dawnbringer with a strike of her staff upon the dry earth. She passed through the threshold of the dark barracks with the little Vicar in tow and the knight brought up the rear, shutting the door behind them. The stone walls around them alight with her glowing staff, Cweneira proceeded a few dozen paces to the back of the foyer they had entered and unveiled a tall wooden staircase in the darkness. They stopped at the first step for Feorie to climb onto the knight's back, then proceeded up the creaking stairs [at a slowed pace to match Alasdair's burdened strides.]

They climbed two floors before the stairs ended. Reaching the top, they found a stone ceiling above them and an open wooden door in the wall before them. Cweneira passed through, leading her company down a hallway lined with identical doors, torches mounted in the wedges of wall between them. One of these wooden portals hung open on its hinges; curiosity on their brow, the Vicar and their knight approached and peered through the entrance. The sparse room sported little more than a window, a bed and a fireplace, but of immediate notice was the deep black hole in the center of the cramped space, a familiar well of nothingness that seemed to lay atop the stone floor.

"Another gate?" Feorie stared into the hole from behind Alasdair's shoulder.

"The Red Kin infiltrated the Sun's Guard. Look there." Cweneira pointed to the fireplace. The sleeve of a red robe lay crumpled up in the ashes of the cold hearth. "An acolyte disposed of his garb and styled himself a soldier."

Alasdair nodded. "I suppose that's how the serpents got in, then."

The Vicars responded not and continued to gaze into the black gate. After several seconds, Cweneira turned and exited the room. The knight and his ward followed her to a

door at the end of the hall, and passing through it, she led them up a second staircase where they ascended another two floors. Looking up, they descried sunlight streaming in through the open exit at the top and hastened up the last few dozen steps.

Passing through the threshold into open air, their feet met the roadside of a bright cobblestone boulevard, the central street of Haulydél that courses through the entire arc of the middle tier. To the left lay a traveler's bazaar, a now deserted hub where fabrics, perfumes and produce sat unattended on their shelves and the shop awnings of colored canvas stirred softly with the breeze. To the right lay empty homes of white stone and mortar, each with their own rich decorations: bronze windchimes singing lonely tunes, potted blue blossoms swaying idly, granite fountains sprinkling for no one. But the trio had set their sights upon the looming cathedral before them on the far roadside, a pallid grey basilica seated high and wide against the backdrop of the mountains, its tall spires trimmed with gold, its proud portico bearing Haulyd's decorous sigil.

"Incredible." Feorie's gaze was fixed upon the golden roof of the cathedral's bell tower. "Absolutely breathtaking."

"Where is everyone?" Alasdair looked down the road to the desolate bazaar. "How could an entire city be evacuated so quickly?"

"I know not," said Cweneira, "but thank heavens they did." She stepped onto the cobblestone. "Come. We've not much further now." The Rockwellians followed the Dragaelic queen as she headed towards the towering cathedral. They all approached the tall portico of gilded marble and Cweneira put both hands on the wide righthand door. "Help me push," she said, Haulyd's sigil glittering a meter above her head. Alasdair and Feorie came to her side, and with all hands upon the shining surface, they strained their arms to move the

heavy door. Increasing their exertion, the hinged marble slowly inched open, and after the trio slipped themselves inside, the entrance slammed shut behind them.

The trio found themselves in a small atrium, a dim space with no windows or candles along the walls. Opposite them, a wide sheet of sunlight streamed in through a horizontal slat in the ceiling, veiling the entrance of the cathedral proper with radiance. Following Cweneira, they stepped into the wall of light, washing themselves with its blinding warmth as they passed through, and came to the foot of a bright granite pathway lined with rows of carpets, lengths of fine fabric dyed the pale yellow of water lilies. Overhead, the vast dome of the edifice loomed over the open interior, a bright space lit by crystalline windows in the shining white walls. Twin marble pillars stood guard before a sparkling pyrite altar at the end of the granite path, and as the queen led them down the smooth stone floor, Alasdair and Feorie looked all around at the aesthetic of white, grey and gold. Reaching the end of the path, they stepped up onto the platform where stood the altar of dull gold and passed around it, approaching an open doorway that led to a set of stairs in the wall behind the ritual table. A smooth slab hanging ajar on its hinges, the door to the dark staircase bore fresh claw marks around its handle and sported a gold-plated kite shield in the center.

“Here it is!” Cweneira ran up to the ornamental shield and put her hand on its engraved surface. “Our gift all those years ago.”

“Bit of a strange place to hang a proof of safe passage,” said Alasdair.

“I disagree, sir knight. There’s no better place for a votive shield than at the foot of the sun god’s temple.”

“Indeed,” Feorie said. “It both decorates the entrance and demands reverence. A perfect way to condition the guest of a deity.”

“If only we were on such a pleasant visit.” Alasdair drew Feorie’s dagger from his hip. “Stay behind me from here onwards.”

The knight proceeded through the doorway onto the first steps of the staircase. The Vicars tore their eyes away from the Testament on the gilded shield and followed him into the dim narrow passage. The light of the cathedral reaching only the foot of the polished stairs, Feorie ascended the first few steps with ease before her handicap forced her to slow her pace through the darkness. Their vision obscured, the holy trio sensed not but the echo of shuffling feet and the chill of the musty air.

“Would the Dawnbringer be helpful, Fey?” Cweneira asked.

“No, that would ruin our approach. We’re meant to walk in the pitch-black so that our exit into the light will be all the more stark. Another conditioning of Haulyd’s guests.”

“Very true. It was rather jarring for me the first time.”

They carried onward and kept to silence. Turning her gaze upwards, Cweneira descried the silhouettes of her compeers bobbing against the backdrop of the exit above, a portrait of a soft sun-risen sky. Nearing the top, the peach-painted heavens rapidly expanded throughout her field of vision, blinding her with the light of the dawn as she reached the last step. Passing from the black stairwell into the bright mountain air, the Dragaelic queen shielded her brow as she exited behind her company, and once her eyes adjusted, she found herself standing by the little Vicar and her knight beholding the terrible radiant scene before them.

Several dozen paces away, Hell’s champion walked the stone path toward the pallid temple of Haulyd, his long obsidian horns gleaming in the glow of the dawn, the broad hex on his back moving with the flex of the muscles beneath as he strode forth. His shoulders

back and breath even, the dark man-beast carried himself with an air too stately for a mere warrior, for the deliberation and focus in his movements exuded an uncanny degree of physical excellence that matched that of the sun god, the black deity who was now descending the air above his temple, his white toga rippling with the wind as he trod down unseen steps of atmosphere to meet his challenger. The Vicars and their knight stood in awe at the god come to Earth from on high and the man-beast come on high from the Earth, a conjunction of divine power born in the sky and accursed power forged in the red depths. The two fire-blackened goliaths approaching each other with their weighty strides, Haulyd passed out of sight behind the temple to enter from the posterior as Fleshbane reached the wide granite steps of the holy edifice.

Alasdair tightened his grip on Feorie's dagger. "This is...this is our time. To act." His breath became deep and concentrated. "I can go first. No, I must go first. Follow me to the foot of the temple steps and remain there throughout. Ready the Aegis in case I must retreat to you or you find yourselves in harm's way." He took two paces toward the temple and stopped. "Survive, my sweet Vicars. Survive at any cost, even at my cost, else this will all be for naught."

He continued forward and the Vicars followed close behind. "Al," Feorie said, "I have no doubt you will live to see another day. As you said, just slip in and slip out." Alasdair kept to silence, his gaze concentrated on the back of the hulking Titan who had reached the top step and was now passing between the fluted pillars of the temple's portico. Without slowing his heavy pace, Fleshbane proceeded forth, passed under the radiant arch of the entranceway and entered into the sun god's domain.

The interior lay wide enough for an audience of hundreds, an expanse of smooth marble atop the peak of the world. The ceiling loomed high over an empty space that stretched dozens of meters before the Bloodletter, and to his left and right, dozens more between him and the pillars of the east and west colonnades. Before the archway in the opposite wall of the towering temple stood a tall throne of ivory and gold, its gleaming backrest sporting an ornate hex at the level of the shoulder blades. Aside from the magnificent seat, the floor of perfect whiteness had no interruption, and the mountain winds blew across its vast barrenness.

A pitch-black hand gripped the side of the posterior archway. The giant sun god ducked his dark head below the arch and entered the edifice, the diamond shackle at his ankle rattling with his mighty steps. From behind his throne, his bright eyes fell upon the horned berserker before the entryway and the dread duelists measured each other from afar, they two equal in height, skin tone and musculature. Haulyd came around to the front of his shining seat and addressed his contender, his voice deep and deadpan.

“Who the hell are you?” Crossing his mighty arms, his toga stretched against his broad chest.

Fleshbane sauntered forward. “I am the end of you. I am your rival, your nemesis, a man become beast and a beast become god. I am the one destined to devour the dawn, and our duel will cease not until your blood runs down the steps of this temple.”

“A nemesis that escaped my lofty gaze? I see the whole of the Earth from on high, my mysterious trespasser. You hail not from this world then, but from Red Hell by the penmanship of your hexes.”

“A school of magic not unknown to you, it seems. The hex upon your throne cancels all means of magic, does it not?”

“Indeed, the Red Kin of Earth cannot hide their scrawlings from my gaze. So you knew your hexes would be null here and yet you came to fight?”

Fleshbane smiled. “I need them not to best you. A battle is decided before it even begins, and my victory is already assured.”

“Folly.” Staring down the black Titan before him, Haulyd squared up. “Such arrogance is folly, and I will prove it to be lethal.” A ring of holy effulgence appeared behind his head, wreathing him in white light as his pale eyes began to shine with blinding brightness. His dark silhouette steadily sank into the ever-increasing radiance and his mouth flashed with a searing sunbeam as he spoke. “It seems I must teach you the meaning of hubris.”

Fleshbane clasped a hand on his lidless eyes as the effulgence burst. Haulyd’s light subsumed the vast temple interior in a fraction of a second, drowning out all perception in blazing whiteness. As the scorching splendor washed over him, Fleshbane proceeded toward its source with eyes covered, the heat intensifying with each step. His head low, he ambled forth in the all-consuming radiance until he felt his long horns touch the sun god’s chest. The Titan palmed Haulyd’s face, covering the god’s shining orifices as smoke plumed from his leathery hand, and the bright emittance ceased. Fleshbane glimpsed a countenance of utter shock between his black fingers before he swept Haulyd’s leg with a swift kick and knocked him off his feet, slamming his head into the marble floor as the deity fell backwards. Wincing with the blow, a grunt muffled by the hand on his face escaped the sun god’s lips, and Fleshbane’s other hand joined its twin and squeezed. His skull straining with the pressure of

the Titan's crushing grip, Haulyd flashed his left eye from between Fleshbane's mighty fingers and shot a beam of blinding sunlight into his face. Flinching, the man-beast retracted a hand to shield his eyes, and as the deity maintained his blazing beam, Haulyd seized the hulking hand on his face and peeled the dark fingers away. The sun god planted a foot on his assailant's chest and pushed him back with a powerful kick, causing Fleshbane to stagger backwards several meters. Haulyd picked himself up from the cracked marble and, with the two goliaths having regained their poise, they squared up again and rushed each other, converging once more in dread combat.

The duelists became a frenzy of dark limbs and straining muscle. They grappled, wrestled, pulled each other to the floor and unleashed flurries of fierce beatings. Their battle resembled a pugilist match in one moment, going hand-to-hand with flying fists and swift deflections, and a bull fight the next, the sun god seizing the Titan by the horns as Fleshbane strained his neck against the submission. Thus did the behemoths duel in the hazy glow of the dawn, splintering the marble floor as they threw each other to the ground, and the mountain peak shook with the weighty impact. Neither had an advantage over the other for long, but soon Hell's champion forced his opponent down and pinned him against the chalky rubble of the arena. Covering the god's eyes and mouth with both palms, Fleshbane held his head in a vice once more and beat the back of his cranium against the white stone, concussing him again and again while Haulyd clawed at his face.

Suddenly, the Titan cried out in horrible agony as his right eye split open, spewing viscous fluid upon an invisible attacker. A holy chime resounded as the talisman of Selvra's Eclipse hit the hilt of the unseen dagger lodged in his ruptured eye, and both the weapon and the wielder materialized. Alasdair stood triumphant abreast the dark man-beast, one hand

grasping a jagged horn and the other gripping the dagger hilt. Twisting his torso away from his victim, he wrenched the fateful blade from the socket, taking the eye with it, and flourishing the weapon, he cast the gooey orb to the ground where its fluids drained onto the ruined marble. Fleshbane brought a hand to his face to cover his dripping socket, and twisting his torso toward the knight, the Titan elbowed Alasdair hard in the chest, breaking all the ribs on his right side and sending him flying with the sheer force. He landed on his back several meters away and gasped for breath as he clutched his breast, blood running down his fingers in streams.

Haulyd seized the moment. Now freed from the man-beast's assault, the deity sat up, grabbed Fleshbane by the wrists and held his arms down at his sides. The halo of light returned to the back of his bleeding head and his eyes heated up once more with blazing light. Bringing his face within mere inches of Fleshbane's remaining lidless eye, Haulyd opened his mouth and unleashed the sun's holy flame upon the man-beast, engulfing his horned head in an inferno of blinding radiance. Alasdair shielded his eyes as the intensifying solar jet subsumed the entire summit temple with spreading effulgence, and from afar, any wanderer gazing upon the mountain in that moment would think a nascent sun was born upon its pallid peak.

The all-consuming brilliance soon ebbed and retreated to the black godhead. Now with the light extinguished, the knight opened his eyes and gazed upon the aftermath: Haulyd loomed over Fleshbane on hands and knees, the Titan utterly still with his right eye socket steaming. The sun god rose from the limp body of his fallen contender and stood over the cadaver. Breath heavy with exhaustion, he closed his shining eyes and let victory rush over him, his relief clear on his countenance. Alasdair tried to rise to his feet but doubled over in

pain as he straightened his torso, and he fell back supine as his tunic darkened with dribbling blood. Hearing the knight's moans, Haulyd rushed over to him and knelt by his side, leaving the Titan's body to lay in the stony rubble.

"Hold still," the god said, "and grit your teeth." Haulyd grasped the knight's hands and drew them away from his wound, a raw cavity in his chest made from the obsidian bone protruding from Fleshbane's elbows. Pressing the edges of the wound closed with his mighty grip, the deity focused a beam of heat from his eye onto the conjoined flesh to cauterize it closed, and Alasdair cried out with pain renewed. The bleeding stemmed, and the dark god rescinded his searing beam and offered a hand to the supine soldier. Alasdair reached for it but winced and leaned back down, instead rolling over onto his belly and rising to his hands and knees. He raised his head and looked Haulyd in his sky-blue eyes.

"Thank you, bright lord. You've saved me."

"Tender no thanks to me," the black sun god replied, "for rather you are my savior, the savior of the sun and his city, the thwarter of Hell's designs. Your valorous deeds here shall never be forgotten, the people of Haulydel will sing your praises far and wide and you shall be held in their highest esteem. Rise when you are able, and you will be inducted into the annals of history."

A blast rang out behind the godhead, followed by the crumbling of porcelain shards. Haulyd and Alasdair turned to the source of the sound: having tied his crimson blindfold around his empty sockets, Fleshbane had crept up to the god's chryselephantine throne in complete blindness, grasped the back of the seat with both hands and tore it down with vicious force, splintering the gold-trimmed slab of ivory and ruining its hex. "My magic, unchained." The hexes on his blindfold and his broad back flashed dark red. "My body, freed

from the last of its flesh.” Obsidian tendrils sprouted from his temples, forming twin tusks that curved down along his straining jawline. Head enwreathed in fourfold horns, his body swelled and pulsed, his muscles thickening and engorging with raw fibers, his stature growing until his pointed obsidian scraped the smooth ceiling of the temple.

“Go!” Haulyd cried to the knight as blood began streaming from his bright eyes. “Flee this place!” His lips sprayed red with every word. Alasdair rose to his feet and stumbled toward the temple entrance, his teeth clenched with the agony in his chest. Blood trickled from his eyes, ears, mouth, nose, nailbeds. The sutured gash in his chest began to tear and bleed anew, and he put his hands on his knees as he retched blood onto the cracked marble. As the knight fled, the sun god turned to the monstrous Titan and sped forth to challenge him once more, but rushing deeper into Fleshbane’s fell auras, the red streams pouring down Haulyd’s face grew thicker as he approached, and his skin sprouted sick blisters and yellow pustules all over. The god’s pace slowed as the four-horned man-beast turned to face him, and after a few weak steps the divinity fell to his knees, shaking and vomiting as he succumbed to pestilence and exsanguination. Leaving the splintered throne behind, Fleshbane ambled forth and met the bright lord where he lay, towering over the pitiful deity who convulsed on hands and knees. The Titan seized the feeble god by the head with one massive hand, his whole cranium fitting in the palm like an onion, and lifted him from the ground. Dangling in the air, Haulyd could only fit one hand around a single hulking finger at a time as he tried to wrench himself free, but his strength gave way to anemia as blood drained from his orifices. His grip on the Titan’s digits slackened until his arms dropped and hung limp by his sides, and now with the once mighty god made weak with atrophy and malaise, the colossal man-beast grabbed Haulyd’s midsection with one hand and

twisted his head with the other. The deity could muster little more than a slack-jawed moan as a final utterance.

It was not enough for the neck to snap. Fleshbane savored every crunch of the vertebrae as he twisted the godhead once, twice, three times over. With the sun-blackened skin of the neck torn asunder from the rotations, the man-beast pulled upwards to rip the cranium from its fleshy seat, the corkscrewed spine still attached as it slipped out of the stump with a shower of red. The chain of vertebrae swayed with the breeze as he brought the head before his blindfolded sockets, descrying with his All-Seeing Hex the face of dawn-bringing Haulyd slick with blood and pockmarked with boils. The Bloodletter held the godhead in his clutch just one second more before parting his lips and shoving it past his jagged teeth, guzzling down the wide-eyed ruins of the divinity with a deep gulp.

Alasdair staggered away to the temple entrance and collapsed against a cold pillar at the top of the steps. Breathing heavily, his chest pumped red streams down the fluted column as Fleshbane tore the limbs off the sun god's body and swallowed them whole. The pallid stairs of the temple became awash with the knight's blood as the pooling crimson poured down the steps, a waterfall of exsanguination that reached the Vicars where they sat at the bottom. Cweneira turned her gaze to the temple entrance.

“Oh god!” She sprang to her feet as Feorie struggled to rise in her handicap.

“No!” Alasdair cried down. “Stay where you are!” As she bounded up the stairs alongside the cascading red, Cweneira felt warmth trickle down her face and fingers. She slowed, looked down at her bleeding nailbeds and screamed, sudden horror stopping her in her tracks. “Retreat!” the knight called down again. Alasdair took two arduous paces before slipping on his own blood and tumbling down the stairs. Battered by the steps and stained

with the crimson stream, he cracked at knee cap on a hard edge as he fell past Cweneira, landed facedown on the mountain path at the bottom and lay still. A dull groan escaped his lips as Cweneira raced down to him, red droplets pouring from her pumping fists like juice from a crushed pomegranate.

“Al!” Feorie hastened to hobble over to his side. She tossed her pointed crutch away and leaned over him on hands and knees, crying out in shock as blood rained from her face onto the back of his tunic. “What the hell is happening?” The approaching aura befell the royal company, their skin becoming pale and speckled with red sores, pustules with ripe whiteheads that sprouted up all over their bodies. Hands riddled with pox and covered in blood, Cweneira snatched up her staff and rushed over to the dying Rockwellians, plunging the white rod into the ground. The Aegis rebounded off the staff and formed the opalescent shield around the three of them; the bleeding ceased without delay and their skin returned to a healthy complexion. The queen let out a sign of relief and let her head fall against the staff.

“Al!” Feorie cried, desperate concern on her brow. “Al, are you alright? What happened up there? You were gone for so long and then that blinding light flooded the temple, and I didn’t know what to think, and –”

She stopped short. Alasdair’s wide-eyed gaze was fixed on the temple above. Cweneira knit her brow at the sudden silence and raised her head toward Feorie and Alasdair. Their wide-eyed gazes were fixed on the temple above. She followed their eyes up the steps and stared.

Radiant and terrible, the amalgam of Heaven and Hell stared back. The Bloodletter stood tall between the mighty pillars at the top step, before him a dark waterfall of blood upon marble. Palms supine, the towering god-beast slowly descended the red carpet spilling

forth upon the bright stairs, decorating his procession with sanguine heraldry. His toga, white as lofty clouds, stirred gently with the mountain breeze, the wreath of fourfold horns protruding from his temples glinted with obsidian luster, and as he came before the Vicars and their knight, he matched their fear-stricken gaze with a red blindfold across his sockets and a rotating halo of sky-blue eyes.

“Alas,” said the Dawn-Devourer, “I am made anew.”