

Chapter I
A Mass to Unheard Woes

1st October 1111 of the 11th Cycle (C11), Yerusahyn

‘Lord Yeshua, you who exist with the Seraphim On High, may everything I undertake begin and end with you. May it be continued with your help and end under your guidance. May my sharing in the Seraphic Mass free me from sorrow and sin, and make me worthy of your wholesome touch. May I grow in your love and service, and become a worthy offering for you and those you serve. May this everlasting mystery I exalt aid in my soul’s journey to eternity. Amen.’

Uriel’s voice echoed within the near-deserted Grand Cathedral. The two beside her chanted as one to her voice, and each had a similar reason for kneeling there with her. All had seen and committed sin for the sake of justice, and all asked forgiveness of the Seraphim.

Uriel did not have to look behind her to see what was happening. Nuriel was still looking haggard, her nights broken by nightmares of seeing her brother Phaniel’s mutilated state. Last seen her sister-in-law Arariel was still in shock, lying in fitful sleep in their infirmary, brought at Nuriel’s insistence so that the famed physicians of Yerusahyn could help her. It was Grigori who had been Nuriel’s support in the intervening weeks, forcing her to go out and see people, taking her place at vigils over Arariel’s bed so she could attend to her duties, almost dragging her along on missions to the edges of potential battlegrounds.

Despite her spiritual obligation, Uriel felt no burden for Aeshma’s fate. While she had not driven her spear into him, she had condemned him to die in that dark place. She was directly responsible for his death. Yet there was no burden, no sorrow, nothing to compare to the day she had executed the spy Elathan. Why? She had committed a sin against one of her own. No matter how depraved he

had been, it was still a sin. How could she not feel regret? She had killed criminals before, hardened murderers and enemy soldiers who would not think twice about killing her or anyone else. Yet no burden rested on her now, aside from that of keeping all she had seen a secret. She prayed with a full voice, but her words were hollow.

Once prayer had finished, the three rose. No service had been scheduled, so the three had communed in blissful solitude. Yet someone still sang Enochian Chants in the galleries, one of the Lesser Conclave. Uriel winced as the flat voice attempted to reach a high note and faltered, wavering and losing pitch in a flurry of coughing and quick gasps. Grigori stopped himself from laughing as the voice stumbled to pick up where it had dropped that treacherous note. Once outside, Uriel sighed.

‘Whoever that is, they need lessons.’

‘Indeed. They do shame to the Grand Cathedral.’

‘Maybe it was not one of the Choristers.’

‘Undoubtedly. They would never tolerate anyone with such a poor command of their singing voice.’

A short silence, then Grigori looked at Nuriel. He was about to speak when Nuriel forestalled him.

‘Got any plans?’

Grigori looked pleased. For the first time in some weeks, she did not sound like she was overly burdened. A great change for the better.

‘Well, I was thinking of heading into town. Maybe to a little pub I have not visited in ages.’

‘Mind if I come with you?’

‘But... Arariel?’

‘Is awake now. She appears to be taking notice again. I did not want to tell you before.’

‘But this is wonderful–!’ Grigori quickly lowered his voice. ‘Wonderful. I was beginning to lose hope. When can I see her?’

‘Soon. She is resting now.’

‘This is good.’ said Uriel. ‘I am pleased for... Hush how. Who is that?!’

There was a pattering of feet nearby and a servant came running across to them, looking out of breath. ‘Sinbearer Uriel, I have searched everywhere. Patriarch Cassiel, the Lady Sophia and the Higher Conclave wish to see you.’

‘Me alone?’

‘All of you. It is a matter of great import.’

‘Very well. We shall be there at once.’

The servant nodded and left by another path. The trio headed via the Cathedral garden into the main courtyard before the Conclave Building. In the small square were gathered the Higher Conclave, with several Conclavists gathered around Sophia. Eremiel was talking animatedly with Cassiel, who seemed to be distracted by something. As Uriel approached, Cassiel bowed his head to her.

‘Uriel, I am glad you are here. We are to be visited soon by a great personage. We must be prepared for any attack on her.’

‘Her?’

‘Yes.’ Eremiel spoke. ‘Her Sacrosanct Holiness Grand Pope Raziell, leader of the Seraphic Church, Virgin of the Eleven-Fold Glory, and Mistress of the Cardinal Assembly. She will be visiting our Cathedral in the coming week. She has been travelling from the Vaticana for two weeks, seeking to help bring an end to the conflicts in these regions.’

‘If you will pardon my frankness,’ said Uriel. ‘it will take more than simple words to lessen the fighting here.’

‘There is always a chance.’ said Sophia. ‘We cannot deny the possibility that she can bring some resolution at least.’

‘We all have faith in her.’ said Jehoel. ‘She has kept the peace in the lands of the Church for all her seventeen years.’

‘That is another place.’ said Kerubiel. ‘There, peace is maintained through the faith. Here, faith itself is involved in the conflict.’

‘With her here, faith might prevail.’ said Sophia. ‘It is of little meaning to worry about such things now, before she has even set foot within these lands.’

‘Of course.’ Kerubiel bowed his head. ‘Forgive my presumption. History is not a kind teacher.’

‘And its lessons are quite depressing.’ Daniel nodded grimly. ‘I know this better than most. Have we any word on what Grand Pope Raziel shall be doing during her visit?’

‘None.’ said Eremiel. ‘We only received word that she was arriving, not what she would be doing, or why she was coming.’

‘We can easily arrange entertainments for her.’ said Qaphsiel. ‘She will find no lack of hospitality, even here in this faraway place.’

‘Far away.’ Cassiel looked to the skies. ‘These are the Holy Lands, yet they are indeed so far away from that place the Crusaders called home.’

‘The people will be delighted to see her.’ said Sophia.

‘Take care on that score, Saint Sophia.’ said Eremiel. ‘As was proved with the one called Elathan, none born in these lands – not even those we hold closest to us – can be trusted.’

Uriel’s heart twitched, and she struggled to maintain her composure. Why did he have to bring that up? She still remembered the sound of shifting gears, creaking wood, the strangled choking as the rope pulled tight, her own flight in a blind panic of despair and terror...

‘Uriel, you will be in charge of the honour guard.’

Uriel snapped back to reality at Cassiel's words, bowing her head. 'It shall be my honour, Patriarch.'

'I shall begin a town survey,' said Barachiel. 'Yerusahyn must be at its best for her arrival.'

'I must have new hymns of blessing sung,' said Muriel. 'And ensure our services hold the strongest possible praise for the Seraphim On High. Our Grand Pope must have a smooth and sure crossing.'

'I am sure I can determine that for you,' said Ambriel. 'The stars reveal much.'

'They cannot reveal the weather,' sighed Eremiel. 'They barely show anything besides what is beyond the firmament. And that matters little to we of this mortal realm.'

Muriel drew herself up to her full height and looked at Eremiel with an expression suffused with anger. 'The stars are just as important as records and laws, Eremiel. You would do well to remember such.'

'I care for the people of this land, not the vagaries of barely-visible celestial bodies.'

'They are more than that. If you recall your studies, earlier Church writings call them the eyes of the Seraphim.'

'That was before the invention of the telescope.'

'Eremiel, Ambriel, please still this bickering,' Sophia pushed between them just as they seemed about to come to blows. 'It does not become the leaders of Yerusahyn's Seraphic Church to squabble over such trifles of belief.'

The two Higher Conclavists gave submissive bows to Sophia, but still eyed each other with anger. A little later, Cassiel was escorting Sophia to the Cathedral to hear Mass. She was sighing and passing a hand across her eyes.

'Those two will bicker about anything. Even the motions of the stars beyond the firmament are open to their debates.'

‘I am surprised you interrupted them.’ said Cassiel. ‘The last time I attempted such a feat, I was involved in one of their scraps. It took several days for my digestion to recover.’

Sophia chuckled. That laugh recalled the feelings stirring within Cassiel’s bosom. He glanced about them. There was no-one in range of sight or hearing, the garden was deserted. Without warning, he reached round Sophia and drew her close. She did not resist, but made a startled sound that was as quickly suppressed.

‘Cassiel, suppose someone sees.’

‘There is no-one. This may be my only chance. Sophia.’

‘Cassiel.’

The two remained in an embrace. Then Cassiel spoke.

‘Can we not voice it to her?’

‘Who?’

‘The Grand Pope. Can we not ask her to release you from your duties as Yerusahyn’s Saint?’

‘Cassiel, do not be so selfish.’

‘I love you, Sophia.’ the words had never been so openly declared. ‘I love you, and I want to wed you and be with you. I want to see our children grow under our loving eyes in a peaceful land. The Saint must remain celibate. Must I forever be barred from she whom I love more than other woman in the world?’

So much of this had never been spoken. Sophia had guessed it all, but still blushed, then gently pushed herself away.

‘I chose this life, Cassiel. It was not thrust upon me as a hereditary burden, but my reasoned choice when the elder Saint died.’

‘But the Grand Pope is the true voice of the Church. She can ratify your removal from Sainthood.’

‘No. We will wait.’

‘Wait? Wait for what? For us both to be grey-haired and decrepit?!’

‘Cassiel, keep your voice down. I have long known your feelings for me, and I too wish to be relieved of my duties to the Cathedral. There is a presence in there that I do not trust. But I will not use the Grand Pope for such a thing.’

Cassiel was perplexed. ‘Presence? What do you speak of?’

‘I have been sensing something strange. It started several months ago. You may remember in August, when we were praying and I jumped?’

‘Yes, I remember. Just. I thought it was nerves.’

‘It may have been the strongest I had ever felt. It was not the first time I felt something watching me. There have been other times, in private, when I have sensed such things. Once or twice, it was as if it were trying to touch me.’

‘Something? Or someone?’

‘This was no human eye. It seemed to be all around me, and yet was not there at all. And there was no love or kindness in it. All I felt in that moment was pure, focused disdain.’

Cassiel gingerly reached out, and this time was received warmly. ‘You are truly afraid of this feeling?’

‘Yes. And the terrible thing is....it feels at home. It does not feel like an intruder, but the true inhabitant. It is as if I am the intruder, and I must pay for that transgression— Beware, Eremiel.’

The words were hissed as a mere breath. Cassiel quickly pulled away as the stern figure of Eremiel appeared. He passed them with a respectful nod, then went through the gateway into the Cathedral’s atrium. Sophia followed him with her eyes.

‘Do you think he suspects?’

‘He did not see us.’

‘That is not what I asked.’

‘I... I do not know. But... Well. We must not be late for Mass.’

‘Indeed. Come then, Patriarch.’

They slumped into their roles with visible reluctance. As they passed through the atrium and entered the Cathedral proper, the shifting of cloth alerted them to nearly two hundred others standing to greet them. The Higher and Lesser Conclave, the Choristers pausing in their ascension to the galleries, and Sophia’s personal attendants in dresses of cream-white fabric edged with gold thread. Sophia’s own dress, a pale white, made her stand out even among the thirty or so Sinbearers present. Uriel stood closest to the dais, her eyes lowered in respect. Cassiel walked just behind Sophia as she proceeded up the aisle, then took his place opposite Uriel as she knelt before the altar.

The ceremony of Mass was long and peaceful despite any turbulent thoughts its leaders might have harboured. The Enochian Chants sounded above, clear and tuneful. The Seraphic Prayer sounded from over two hundred throats, Sophia’s clear voice was raised during the Choristers’ rests to echo through the Cathedral’s vaulted expanse. During that intermission, Cassiel tried not to look at Sophia. How long had he stolen glances at her from afar, and finally from close to when he had risen through the Sinbearer ranks to become their leader? How long had he pined, wished to be close to her, to touch her, to feel her full and true.

Uriel was also embraced by her own thoughts, unsure of where to go next from where she stood. She had seen the Seraphim. Seen them, and loathed them. By even harbouring such thoughts, she was committing deepest blasphemy. To doubt the Seraphim, to speak out against them from within the Church itself was a cardinal sin, punishable by death. One of those she had fought with for so long, maybe even Nuriel or Grigori, would need to take her head for her transgression. She prayed hard, but not to the Seraphim. She prayed for any sort of salvation, any form of clarity which would bring certainty to her wavering heart. She also considered Nuriel, kneeling somewhere behind her. What was she going through? What thoughts tortured her and drew her from prayer?

The service ended, and there was a near-ceremonial procession out of the Cathedral, with Sophia and Cassiel leading side by side. Uriel followed directly behind, and suppressed a grimace when she found herself next to Eremiel in the procession. He did not look at her, but even in that there seemed some slight trace of high-brow contempt. As if he felt himself superior to all other beings in that procession, and would have been more than comfortable making it an exclusive service for himself alone. Such arrogance. It was that kind of unfeeling coldness that started wars where none were needed.

‘I shall be visiting Arariel now.’

Nuriel spoke to Uriel when they were in the open air, coming from further down the procession to speak with her. Uriel nodded, smiling a little.

‘You can have all the time you need.’

‘Thank you. Serap... Yes, Seraphim bless you.’

Nuriel bowed her head and left. Uriel almost smiled; that slight hesitation, then return to form. It was more than she could accomplish. She had seen the Seraphim, or what claimed to be them. How could she give her loyalty to....that? It mattered little. She had her duty as a Sinbearer, whether it was in service to the Church or not, and she was tasked with preserving the peace and winning this war. The fronts had been quiet for a long time, but that would surely not last. She thought of Astarte and Leviathan, of their starkly contrasting attitudes to having herself and the others as allies.

As her mind lingered on Leviathan, something else struck her sharply. Some faint echo of recognition. It was not the feeling of a friend meeting another after some great span of time, but that of recognising a face from a long-forgotten painting or mural, or even seeing someone who had stepped out a legend. The white hair of an elderly woman flowing down long and luscious from the black-skinned visage of a woman in the full flowering of youth. But her eyes betrayed longer years, when they looked at Uriel with such fullness and pity.

‘Uriel.’ Jeohel’s voice called to her. ‘I wish to speak with you about some matters concerning

security.’

Swallowing her thoughts, Uriel answered the call of the Conclavist, and prepared to fulfil her duties to the best of her ability.

‘You are sure she is well?’

The physician nodded. ‘Physically, she seems in perfect health. She is just behaving rather strangely for someone in her position. I would have expected some storm of emotion when she was fully herself, but I have seen nothing. I have not dared try to force any reaction from her due to her fragile condition.’

‘Fragile?’

‘She saw her husband die horribly, and was subject to goodness knows what in an attempt to break her spirit. Her mind is in a delicate state. If pushed too far, it may break and who knows what she might try to do then.’

‘I will not attempt to force her memory. But I still want to see her.’

‘That is well. You may have a few minutes.’

Nuriel entered the room cautiously. It was like entering an angry child’s room: she had no idea what kind of response she would get from the woman lying on the bed next to the open window. She expected some horrible sight that would scar her for the rest of her days, as if she had not suffered such already. Instead, she saw a fairly composed woman sitting on the edge of the bed, looking out of the window with a neutral expression.

‘Arariel?’

Arariel turned, smiled like an innocent child. ‘Nuriel. It is good to see you again. It has been so long.’

The voice was calm. Too calm. Nuriel smiled and came forward, kneeling in front of Nuriel.

‘How are you?’

‘Well. Thank you. I.... Forgive me, but where am I?’

‘You... do not remember?’

‘I am not sure. I feel like something is lingering in the back of my mind. But maybe my dear Phaniel will know. Where is he?’

It was all Nuriel could do to stop herself from blurting out the truth, from showing tears, from causing this innocent woman further pain. ‘He...he is out at the moment. He said he may be gone for some time. Here in Yerusahyn, he said there may be opportunities for expanding his business.’

‘Ah yes. Probably that is so. Yerusahyn, eh? We must have been here on business. The last thing I remember is being on Khypra. You know, you may well be an aunt soon, Nuriel. Phaniel is planning a family.’

‘Really? That is good news.’

‘Yes. Indeed. We have not tried in full yet, but he is sure of our success. Oh, what a glorious day it will be when our child is born.’

‘Yes. Yes indeed. Excuse me, Arariel. I have business to attend to.’

‘Of course. Give my regards to your friend Grigori.’

‘I will.’

She turned to go, then Arariel recalled her. ‘Nuriel, can you tell me something?’

‘Yes?’

‘Some name lingers in my mind. It is coming to my dreams, and the association is not pleasant. It may be some execution you were party to and I heard about through Phaniel. The name is... Aeshma. Yes, Aeshma.’

It took all Nuriel's self-control not to flinch. She prayed that Arariel did not see the strain on her face.

'No. I cannot recall any name like that.'

'I see. Thank you. I will rest a while now. I do not know why, but I feel so... very tired. Like I have been through a great ordeal.'

Nuriel left, and leaned against the wall in a stunned state. She shook her head, passed a hand across her forehead. The physician came up beside her.

'Any change?'

'She... she remembers nothing. She thinks Phaniel is still alive. She thinks they will be starting a family shortly. She..!'

'Mistress Nuriel, please keep your voice down. Arariel may hear you, and who knows what that might do.'

Nuriel looked at the physician with a horrible expression. 'That.... child in there... is not Arariel. Arariel died on that island!'

Nuriel rushed down the corridor, tears streaming from her eyes. She made her way down out of the infirmary and across to the Residences. In the central courtyard, she crumpled to her knees and convulsed with the force of her weeping. After a brief time, a Sinbearer sitting on the edges of the courtyard absorbed in a book saw and approached. Nuriel looked up, her eyes reddened with weeping, then she struggled to regain her composure.

'Sinbearer Agiel. I... Forgive me, I am not myself.'

Agiel knelt down beside her, her concern clear. 'You are distressed. Is there anything I can help with?'

'No. No thank you, Agiel. The one for whom I mourn is beyond help. Two hells await her now; a hell of ignorance, or a hell of sorrow.'

Agiel frowned, unsure of whom she meant. ‘The one for whom...? You mean that new arrival, the patient from Khypra.’

‘My sister-in-law Arariel. Her husband, my brother, died at the hands of that monster Aeshma. She remembers nothing of it.’

‘That is not entirely surprising. Those who had suffered so often block out the memory if it is truly too painful. She will recover in time.’

‘Should she? What she saw, that monster turning her husband into a perverted idol of pain. Maybe it would be better not to remember.’

‘You cannot keep her in the dark forever. Sooner or later, she will ask where her husband is, why you are so sad.’

‘I know. I... Is this what Uriel warned us of? The burden of the Sinbearers?’

Agiel lowered her eyes. ‘The burden we bear is not just of official duties as takers of life, but the burden we bear through the actions we witness. Or those we bear for others too weak to shoulder for themselves. It is a terrible price, and we pay it so others need not. So they might be free of sin and sorrow.’

‘Is it really worth it? Keeping such a secret, just so Arariel can be free of sin and sorrow, to live in her fantasy?’

‘That is up to you to decide. I know how hard it must be. I lost someone I loved, so I know some of your burden at least.’

‘You lost someone?’

‘Yes. Someone very dear to me. Someone I thought I could hold onto. But it proved to be nothing but illusion.’

‘Who was it?’

Agiel did not answer. She helped Nuriel to her feet, then began walking back to her dormitory.

‘You need some lighter company than I.’ said Agiel over her shoulder. ‘Find your friend Grigori. He would cheer you if anyone would.’

Nuriel had to admit the wisdom of these words. Bowing respectfully, she headed out into the gardens and searched for Grigori. She knew he would be taking a run round the Cathedral grounds at this time, when the sun was climbing but not at full strength. Even today, with Arariel’s presence and the impending visit of Grand Pope Raziel, he would surely be on that run. She knew the route, and placed herself at a point where she could intercept him.

Sure enough, he came round the corner in light clothing and sandals, loping along like a tired beast of burden. He slowed to a halt when he saw her staring at him, and stared back for a moment.

‘Yes? What is it?’

‘I wish to get out of this place for a time.’ Nuriel’s manner seemed natural. ‘Fancy a visit to one of our local houses of shelter and drink.’

Grigori narrowed his eyes. ‘I thought you were visiting Arariel.’

‘That? Oh that is done. She is well. But I wish to meet with others. It seems an age since we last went out for fun.’

‘It is indeed a long time. But you need not pretend to me.’

‘Pretend?’

‘Yes. I know Arariel’s condition. The physician told me.’

‘Why you?’

‘Because I am your friend. And I will submit to oblivion rather than see you bottle everything up like this. It is not healthy.’

‘Do you not think you share enough of this burden already? I merely wish to limit the damage. Too much has been destroyed already.’

‘You will destroy yourself if you do not let go. Come out by all means, but let it be for the true

need to relax, not a means to escape reality.’

‘I.....’ a silence. ‘I do need to escape. And I would rather escape with you than others. Unless you need to complete your run.’

Grigori produced an expected smile. ‘Nothing is more important than enjoying time with a friend. Especially for someone as old as me.’

‘You are not old.’

‘Past my two score.’

‘That is not old.’

‘That is kind of you. Now, you will dry those tears, and come with me.’

Grigori held out his hand. Nuriel looked at it, its weathered palm that had been with her throughout her training. She reached out with her own, smooth and rough meeting like two halves of a whole, and they headed out.

Chapter II

The Sacred Viewing the Fall

October 3rd, Hayamgal Seas

The ship had been rocking gently as it came nearer the lands of Sur. After two weeks on land and one week by ship navigating from the Vaticana, the prospect of spending a considerable amount of time within friendly territory at a site sacred to her venerated predecessors made Raziél feel more fulfilled than she had been in a very long time. Tradition had once demanded that new Grand Popes travel to Yerusahyn to receive their blessing in Yeshua's native land. Now, with war raging between the Church and the Shah, such a journey was impractical and dangerous. Except for the headstrong woman who now occupied the post.

Given the titles "Her Sacrosanct Holiness", "Virgin of the Eleven-Fold Glory", and "Mistress of the Cardinal Assembly", Grand Pope Raziél was a force to be reckoned with, and the first female Pope in over two generations. The Church was just emerging from a misogynistic era where women had been excluded from high office, and only in the past decade had the ruling been overturned. With that, hundreds of Cardinals had put themselves forward as potential candidates for the post. After much discussion among the upper echelons of the Church, Raziél had been chosen due to her dedication and piety. She had also been forced to relinquish her birth name, going through a second baptism and becoming who she was now.

'Lady Raziél.' the captain came up to her, bowing low.

'Yes?'

'We will be in Yerusahyn's harbour in a few hours. We are now passing through waters held by

the enemy. I suggest you go below.’

Raziel raised an eyebrow. ‘You think me some weak woman who flees from threats? That is surely not the best example for a Grand Pope to set.’

‘Of course not, Lady Raziel. But your safety comes before all else—’

‘Twin ships off the port bow!’

The lookout’s voice broke across the ship, and Raziel turned to see. Two ships were fast approaching, showing the low and sleek design of native Sur. They flew no flag, but armed men could be seen at their forward. Even with the wind to their starboard, they were closing the gap fast. The captain clenched her fists.

‘Curses, pirates! Lady Raziel, please go below. For your own protection. I must insist as your captain and your protector.’

Raziel reluctantly passed into the captain’s cabin and heard it being locked behind her. She then went to a small knothole in the planking she knew would let her see out. She had spied it a few days before when dining with the captain, and thanked the Seraphim for its presence. The two enemy ships were gaining, and raiding parties were clearly visible on the bows, prepared to jump aboard when the gap was closed. Her own ship, a powerful galleon, was more than ready for such intrusions. She heard the shuttling of heavy metal as the breaches were raised as the cannons below hauled into position.

The cannons were seen too late by the attackers. Raziel covered her ears as the shout went out: Fire! A billowing cloud of pale smoke rushed out from the side of the ship, and the barely-visible metal ball it had launched struck the bow of the ship. The impact was heavy, and the bow was splintered upon impact, sending arrow-sized splinters in all directions. Those who had gathered near the bow to port and starboard were the worst hit, with a few tumbling into the sea as bloody shadows, turning the waters to either side of the ship pink. At the prow of each enemy ship was a small ballista, which were now fired in retaliation.

The ballistae rocks whistled through the air and struck, rocking the galleon. Razielle was thrown back from her peephole, but the shock was momentary. Another burst of sound heralded a second cannon shot, this time aimed at the other ship. The cannonball glanced along the port side, stripping away the decking, sending several crew flying into the water together with chunks of wood and wisps of rope torn from the rigging. As Razielle watched, the two ships started to turn about, but not to unleash any hidden weapon. The barrage from the galleon had forced them into retreat, to limp back to their native shore defeated and crippled.

It was a few minutes later, when the enemy ships were fast sailing towards the horizon, that the captain opened the door and allowed Razielle to step out once more. She immediately saw the damage wrought by the enemy's single retaliation. The ballista's missile had slammed into the starboard side, jamming into the decking and trapping one of the crew beneath its fatal weight. Razielle bowed her head, then turned solemnly to the captain.

'If I may, I wish to pray before you do anything with him.'

The captain nodded. 'We would count it an honour for you to do so. We cannot take him back home, only bury him when we come to land. To have your blessing will surely secure his soul, and free him ever more from sin and sorrow.'

Razielle nodded and went over to where the man lay. Half his body had been crushed beneath the great rock, causing oozing lines of blood to creep out around him. Others were close, but they drew back as Razielle approached. Kneeling down just outside the area where his blood gathered, she placed her hands together in prayer and spoke in a soft yet clear voice.

'Grant unto this poor soul eternal bliss, oh mighty Seraphim. Let your light shine upon them and deliver them forever more from sorrow and sin. May the souls of those departed, if they be true to you and love you ever, forever more rest in peace.' she then added. 'And may this death be the last rather than the first in a new flow of life tossed away upon the sacrificial pyre of this foolish war.'

Razielle rose and motioned to the crew. 'You may now take and tend to him. I have prayed, and I

hope the Seraphim have heard and will spirit him quickly to their realms of tranquillity. Let us now show his body what respect we can, in memory of his life.'

The Grand Pope drew back to her position on the quarterdeck, and watched as the crew tipped the missile into the sea, then did their best to prepare the body of their comrade for burial on the mainland.

Yerusahyn

'No. Please. I cannot stand any more!'

'But you are barely finished. Come now. Let me see that eye. Yes. Yes! That is the look... Ah no, it is gone! Why does it always go? Can you not sustain it, become my perfect model. You have endured so much, it would be a shame to give up now. Perhaps depriving you of your flawed vision will render your sublime qualities of suffering incorruptible by hope's foul balm.'

'I cannot stand more. Kill me, I beg of you. There, you see! I am begging! I beg you, end it, please. Spare my wife any more of this.'

'Ah. Yes. Your wife. She also is a wonderful piece, one of the best. Her face is a vision of sorrow and anguish, hidden beneath a veil of growing darkness. Can you not see it? Can you not? Can you not? Can you....?'

The voice trailed away, slipping into the back of her mind. Why could she not recall any more? All she could sense were voices, no images to go with it. Arariel rose slowly from her bed and began pacing in her room once again. She had wanted to find out the truth, wanted to learn what had happened. It would be simpler if Phaniel returned. She had asked once or twice where he had gone, but his sister Nuriel was being evasive. Why? She could not fathom the reason. Sitting again, she tried once again to fix faces to the voices.

They had first come in dreams two days prior, lingering on the edges of her consciousness like noises coming through a door. She had sat on the bed, rapping her head slowly with her hand, hoping that some fragment of the vision connected with the sounds would return, but it had not. She now paced, paced, paced up and down with such vigour that the physician had come in and asked whether she was unwell. She had asked whether she could get onto the roof for some peace and quiet, but he had refused for reasons he would not share. Why was everyone keeping secrets from her? And where was Phaniel?

'Please. Please, kill me.'

The voice. She knew that voice. It was lingering in her mind, something good and clean. But in this instance, it was dark and terrible. A black mark on her memory, if she could retrieve it. She finally managed to sit still for a few seconds, then she felt suddenly restless. She went to the door and opened it. The attending physician came up to her.

'Is there something you would like?'

'I need to get out of here for a bit. Can I go to the garden?'

'Surely. I will accompany you.'

Arariel allowed herself to be accompanied down into the infirmary's gardens, which were beautiful and medicinal, holding herbs brimming with wondrous smells and beautiful blooms. She sat near a large patch of mint, restrained by a border of rocks that went down several inches, and let the smell take her back to another mint garden she knew on Khypra. She looked round, imagining the house she and Phaniel lived in. Smiling, she thought of the child that would soon be in her belly, if Phaniel could get round to it. He loved her full and true, but the few times they had tried had been unsuccessful. This time, it would work.

'Children. Children.' she murmured to herself. 'Something about children. Phaniel and I want children. But that is not it. Children, children.'

She pondered for a few seconds, then the voice came again. That dark voice she could not

remember.

'My adorable children. My greatest creations, sculpted from the purest despair, born from no foul union of bodies. You please me exceedingly.'

Arariel suddenly shuddered. The way it had been said. It was nothing short of terrifying. Had she truly been anywhere near that voice? Or was it her uncertainly playing tricks on her mind? She could not tell any more. Her mind was by a small growth of lucerne. She looked at the plant, which was currently in bloom, and suddenly felt sickness creeping through her.

A vision returned to her, as if rising from deep water. A man, cold and smiling, standing in front of another mutilated man, her beloved Phaniel. He was holding a lucerne in his hand. They grew wild on Khypra, and he had picked a flower spike and brought it. His words echoed through her mind.

'Such a beautiful plant. I have always found it a most invigorating inspiration for my work. Its symmetry is so stimulating, and its scent is so subtle and relaxing. It reminds me of when I reached epiphany, when I find a truly wondrous piece of art. Or at least, it puts me in mind of that dream. You may yet fulfil that dream, my beautiful Phaniel. You, and your wife, shall be my dual masterpiece. Physical anguish coupled with mental agony, all enhanced by your bond of love. I think, once I have completed you, I shall paint you. I am an excellent painter. I shall capture this moment, and you shall be preserved in eternity. Is that not fine?'

Phaniel's voice came through. Arariel suddenly clutched her head, shaking from head to foot.

'End...me....you....fiend.'

'Dear, dear. Surely not. That voice is so rough. It grates against the vision I am creating. I know. I shall muffle it. But how? How, how, how indeed...?'

'So... beautiful...' the whispered words came as if forced from Arariel's throat by another's hand.

'Beautiful, a work of art. Suffering incarnate.'

'I shall remove at least a part of it, the part hampering my work. I shall... remove your words.

You shall be as a wonderful being, a wordless—'

'NO!'

Arariel's scream of agonised defiance startled her watcher from his rest. He came over, gently helped her to her feet, began escorting her back to the house.

'Come now. You will be better soon.'

An expression passed across her face. It made her companion very uneasy.

'Better.... Yes. I shall be better. Very soon.'

After half an hour of clear sailing, Raziel was ready to disembark at the port itself. She was sombre in heart, as she knew she would need to get off before the crew could attend to their fallen fellow, and the ceremony of officially welcoming her to this holy land could be quite long. She stood ready on the edge as a crowd of Yerusahyn's local population cheered from the bank. The most obvious feature was a quartet of Machina placed ready for trouble. A large division of high-level Crusader soldiers formed a barrier between the people and where she would be walking, watched over by several Sinbearers. She recognised the local representatives who formed the Grand Cathedral's Higher Conclave, and among them she recognised the face of Patriarch Cassiel and.. Surely, that could not be Lady Sophia? It had been years since they last met as young students.

The ship pulled into port, trumpets sounded welcome, the gangway was lowered and Raziel began her descent. The eyes of the Higher Conclavists present, Eremiel alongside Kerubiel and Muriel, saw the damage done to the ship and looked with concern at Raziel herself. She appeared unharmed, and for that they were thankful, but what else had befallen her? Raziel descended to greet both Cassiel and Sophia, pressing their hands warmly before turning to Muriel. She launched

into her speech, her voice carrying to all within the harbour.

‘Your Most Sacred Holiness Grand Pope Raziel – leader of the Seraphic Church, Virgin of the Eleven-Fold Glory, and Mistress of the Cardinal Assembly – we wish to welcome you to our city. Here, in this most sacred land, and in this most sacred of cities where our beloved founder Yeshua experienced true revelation, we hope that you will enjoy a most pleasant and instructive visit. Though the times be trying to us all, and the threat of heretic attack ever present, we shall protect you even with our lives, and we all dedicated ourselves to you and to the greater glory of the Seraphim, for you in whom they have placed their trust.’

The speech ended abruptly, and Raziel was surprised it did not go on for some little time more. In her land, speeches that short were frowned upon, as the key to delivering oratory was to say as much and as little as possible. What she had just heard seemed to say much with very few words. Maybe it was something about local culture. She responded promptly.

‘I thank you for your kind reception. I shall be staying here for perhaps five weeks, during which time I shall receive visits and messages from those in these lands who are loyal to us. I would also wish to learn local traditions surrounding our beloved founder, and of course the progress of our most unfortunate skirmishes with those who still refuse to accept the Seraphim as our true creators. Conduct me as you will, for in this land I am the visitor, and shall be led accordingly.’

It was like any other polite acceptance of a courteous reception. Cassiel and Sophia took charge, and walked with Raziel down the prepared pathway, with the Conclavists following behind and Crusader soldiers on either side. The procession took them through a presentable part of the city, and approached the Cathedral grounds. As its spires appeared over the edges of the buildings and wall, Raziel felt a sudden chill passing through her. It was as if she had seen something watching her, a form unlike anything in the mortal world, which had then vanished like smoke. The feeling lasted but a moment, and it was quickly forgotten in the midst of the surrounding cheer. All the same, a slight fear remained.

She approached the grand frontage of the Cathedral, entering its atrium and greeting the other members of the Higher Conclave. They were accompanied by members from the Lower Conclave, and the voices of the Choristers could be heard from within the Cathedral. Many other senior and junior Sinbearers were present. She graciously and piously accepted their genuflections and near-fawning praise in reverence to her status and mystic power. She bore nothing related to this land's heretic sihr, but her role as Grand Pope lent her a similar presence.

‘We are more than honoured to receive you in our lands.’ said Qaphsiel, raising his hand to hers. ‘We never dared expect such a visit.’

‘We all feel the deepest reverence for your visit.’ said Ambriel. ‘The stars beyond the firmament were surely moved to grant us this.’

Eremiel chuckled. ‘You must forgive my fellow’s turn of phrase, Grand Pope. As Astronomer, she puts things in..’

‘Astrological terms.’ completed Raziel. ‘I fully understand.’

‘It is good to have you with us.’ said Sophia.

‘And it is good to see you once again.’ said Raziel. ‘Some little time ago, we served together as Church students.’

Sophia took a little time to remember. ‘Ah, yes. I recognise you. Though I cannot recall a name.’

‘My name now is Raziel. Let it remain so. I am pleased to find you as the new Saint of Yerusahyn’s Grand Cathedral. I had always hoped you would rise to greatness in your own realms.’

‘Indeed. I have had a good life here. Patriarch Cassiel has been most supportive in these dark times.’

‘Indeed.’ Raziel turned to Cassiel. ‘I have heard of the Sinbearers’ admirable efforts in these lands.’

‘I would have you meet some of my staunchest fellows.’ said Cassiel. ‘They bring pride to the

Sinbearers, and lead the Crusaders in their marches against the infidel lands with unflinching devotion to the Seraphic Church.'

Even as these near-lies passed his lips and made him feel utterly wretched, Cassiel motioned for Uriel to approach. She was introduced, and was greeted with a smile by Raziel.

'It is good to meet those keeping the sanctity of this realm intact.'

'Aye.' Uriel's reply was controlled. 'But none can work alone. These two here are my close companions. They have aided me in recent missions. Grigori and Nuriel, two new recruits.'

The two bent knee to the Grand Pope, who bid them rise and greeted them with a benevolent smile. None of those present noticed the figure who was running round the garden area, looking around frantically. Eremiel asked whether Raziel would like to see round the gardens, and she agreed to do so. They began walking through the garden areas, admiring in turn all the plants present, medicinal, edible and ornamental. It was then that Nuriel, walking behind Cassiel in the procession that had formed behind Raziel, glanced to one side and saw the fleeting and anxious figure. She knew him; it was one of the staff at the infirmary. Her heart skipped with fright at who or what he might be searching for.

'Grigori, I must....' she tailed off. 'How can I get to him? I must know what he wants, even if he is just looking for a herb.'

'You think it may be about Arariel?'

'Yes.'

'But you can hardly leave this procession without warning. And would you interrupt a Conclavist speaking with the Grand Pope?'

'I do not care. I must find out.'

Grigori glanced round, then bent close. 'Get ready. Now. Ai!'

Grigori suddenly crumpled, drawing everyone's attention. As he clutched his calf and loudly

bemoaned an attack of cramp, Nuriel slipped away from the procession and approached to the man.

‘Speak quickly.’ she hissed, drawing him aside. ‘Why are you so agitated?’

The man looked pleased to see her. ‘Nuriel, thank the Seraphim. I thought I would never find you. Arariel has gone, vanished from her room.’

‘What? When?’

‘A few minutes ago. She had been brought back in some half hour ago after suffering some kind of attack in the gardens. We put her to bed and she seemed calm, but the woman who was watching her went away for a few seconds and returned to find Arariel gone. We have people combing the infirmary, and I was checking the grounds with some others.’

‘I wish I could...’ the official side of Nuriel withered like flowers in the desert. ‘No, I will help. To oblivion with my duties. Come.’

Grigori was just being helped to his feet and his calf being massaged when Eremiel glanced up and saw Nuriel leaving with the man. He called out to her angrily, but she was deaf to his cries. Raziel frowned.

‘Is something wrong? She seemed quite agitated.’

‘It is nothing.’ said Eremiel calmly. ‘I am sure Cassiel or Uriel will discipline her later. It was most unseemly to leave without asking permission. On such an important day too.’

‘Grand Pope,’ Sophia cut in gently. ‘would you care to see the infirmary gardens? I can near-swear that they are the finest in this land.’

‘Of course. And I would see what happens with its patients.’

‘Most certainly.’ said Eremiel, bowing. ‘This way.’

The procession went along the paths and reached the open infirmary garden, where Raziel was nearly knocked over by a rushing page as she came out of one of the side buildings. She saw who it was, and kowtowed at once.

‘Grand Pope, I most humbly beg your pardon. I did not see—’

‘Calm yourself.’ said Raziel. ‘Is something amiss?’

‘A patient is missing. I was sent to search these outbuildings.’

‘Which patient?’ asked Uriel.

‘The woman Arariel.’

Uriel’s face paled. ‘Oh no. No, no, no, no. Not now.’

A doorway burst open on the other side of the yard. Nuriel and her companion rushed in, looking near-frantic.

‘She must be here somewhere.’ snapped Nuriel to an unheard interjection. ‘We must continue the search. She must be—’

Eremiel looked bewildered. ‘What is all this foolery? I will not tolerate—’

‘We must focus on other matters now, Eremiel.’ Cassiel spoke with authority. ‘Nuriel, is this woman a danger?’

‘Not an active danger...to anyone, but unstable. She may do anything. In the name of all that exists, why did she have to experience—’

As Nuriel spoke, Uriel had turned her face up to look at the infirmary’s roof. It was then that she saw its new occupant.

‘Look, on the roof!’

Everyone looked up at the infirmary roof, and gasped. Arariel stood on the edge of the masonry, her nightgown billowing in the wind, her face visibly streaked with tears. Uriel acted first, rushing towards the door with the intention of getting to the roof as fast as possible. As the others watched, Nuriel came forward, gently calling up to her.

‘Arariel, what are you doing? You should be in bed.’

Arariel looked down. ‘Such foolish words. What does it look like I am doing? Do not interfere, Nuriel. Not you.’

‘Arariel.... Phaniel is waiting for you. He will surely be sorry to see you do this. If you come down, we can talk.’

Grigori came up to her and whispered. ‘Nuriel, this is not helping. Look at her face. She.... She remembers.’

‘Yes!’ Arariel was almost hysterical. ‘I remember. How could I forget? I cannot forget, Nuriel. Now that I remember again, I cannot forget. I watched him do it.’

‘You...really remember?’

‘I watched him cut my husband, torture him, mould him into his twisted shape of “perfection”. I watched as all that happened. I wanted to scream, and I did scream for a time, but eventually I could not. I could not keep screaming.’

Nuriel took a few steps forward, looking up at her sister-in-law. Her words were full of honest emotion.

‘Arariel, what happened was terrible, but that is no reason to do this. You will continue. You are young, you have friends. I can talk. I know what you have—’

Arariel’s words cut her off. Her voice was now totally hysterical.

‘Do not try to understand! You did not live it. You even try to deny it now. You deny that he is dead.’

‘You did not seem to remember. Would you have me hurt you so?’

‘Nothing could be worse than what I endure.’

During this exchange, Uriel had managed to get up onto the roof, and was quietly approaching from behind. If needed, she could yank Arariel away from the edge.

‘You know the funniest thing?’ Arariel looked down at the ground. ‘In my dreams, I see that

moment. Again, and again, and again. And when I see Phanuel before me, bloodied and gored, I am pleased.'

Uriel froze, and Nuriel felt her stomach drop. Arariel's eyes rose to stare out across the city, her arms shook from strong emotion.

'When I look at that vision, I admire it. Aeshma talked so much about the symmetry, the bloodied beauty. He compared it to lucerne blooms. I saw it, the art he was producing. Though my voice was silent, I was delighted to see it nearing completion. Then you and those others arrived, and I was faced with the reality beyond Aeshma's walls. And all I could feel was my wish to return to him, to Aeshma. To complete his work. I saw it and felt it, yet I could not accept it. I still cannot, yet I still see it. I cannot forget it!'

'Arariel, please. I saw it too. Tell me. Show me. I cannot help you if we simply argue and disagree. Show me your vision.'

Arariel shook her head, and her voice trembled. 'No-one should experience what I saw. I am sorry, Nuriel. Your brother loved you so dearly. And you were such a good sister to us both. I wanted to know you. I am glad I could do so before this. I.... I shall bring your love to him!'

Arariel raised her arms. Nuriel started forward, guessing rather than seeing what her sister-in-law was doing.

'NO! STOP!'

Uriel started forward and grasped, but too late. Her hands clutched at emptiness as Arariel threw herself forwards. Nuriel started forwards, but Grigori's strong arm held her back. She saw Arariel's body hovering as if suspended in mid-air, then turned and covered her ears. She heard and felt the impact barely a second later, and slowly turned to look. Arariel's body lay on the ground in front of the infirmary, her limbs twisted into unnatural positions, blood oozing from the back of her head where the skull had cracked on the stone flagging. Her face, staring up at the clear sky, was grotesquely peaceful.

Nuriel looked at the sight for some seconds, then felt Grigori turning her around. She buried her face in his shoulder, bursting into tears. Despite there being no urgency, Uriel rushed back down to stand outside the infirmary, looking from Arariel's corpse to Raziel. Despite Eremiel's gentle protests, Raziel approached and looked down at Arariel's shattered form. She turned to Uriel, Cassiel and Sophia.

'See that this poor woman is given full rights and burial.'

'But Grand Pope,' this was Muriel. 'our sacred laws dictate otherwise. She took her own life, affronting the Seraphim and the very world we live in. Hers is the ultimate sin. She cannot be granted burial in consecrated ground.'

'We cannot just leave her as carrion.' said Grigori.

Eremiel frowned. 'Due to the circumstances, I shall overlook your discourtesy. But Grand Pope, you must decide this.'

Uriel looked long and hard at the Grand Pope. This was the moment that would decide local opinion, and weakness was typically not looked for. She would surely condemn this woman to a fate worse than death, to be shunned and effaced from the lives of everyone who knew her. Both she and Nuriel waited, and after a few moments, Raziel placed her hands together in prayer and spoke.

'Cry death, for we forgive. Cry sorrow, for we transcend. Cry sin, for we forget. O Seraphim On High, let this body be as dust, and let the soul be eternal. Let all that passed in life be forgotten in death, that our sister be returned to your wholesome embrace. We who are but sorrowful sinners, we who are not worthy of passing merit upon any of our fellows, leave judgement to your eternal wisdom, and let go any sin of this mortal realm.'

Everyone was surprised. No-one had heard the prayer before, yet it stirred ancient memories, and seemed authentic. Eremiel spoke first.

'Grand Pope?'

Raziel turned to him. 'I have absolved her soul. She may be buried with full ceremony.'

'But—'

'Do you question the decision of the Grand Pope?'

Eremiel lowered his eyes before Raziel's stern gaze. 'No. I do not. We shall do as you ask.'

'If necessary, set a Machina to stand guard until the Seven Sacred Days have passed so she may truly remain in peace.'

'Yes, Grand Pope.'

Uriel looked at Raziel for some few moments before the procession moved on and others were left to tend to Arariel's corpse. In those moments, she saw a person she had not expected. She had always thought of the Grand Pope as an imperious figure, a symbol of might and cold faith. The woman standing there in the Grand Pope's garb was not those. Instead, she held the tender compassion Uriel had first looked for when she joined the Church. A warmth filled her heart, a feeling she had not experienced for many years. A light was in her eyes that had still not been extinguished, a light all Sinbearers gradually dampened through their harsh and burdensome duties.

But was this feeling her salvation? Or her impending ruin? She did not know, could not know now. Glancing back at where Nuriel still rested in Grigori's supportive arms, she returned to her place in the procession, her mind lost in thought as the tour continued.

Chapter III
The War Maiden in Solitude

1st October, Unknown

‘Asmodeus.’ the swirling essence of Kimaris approached with what those of the mortal plain might call “speed”. ‘Asmodeus, I would speak with you.’

Asmodeus had sensed the coming of its fellow Kimaris some time ago, but it had neither moved to greet or to avoid the meeting. It had been wholly preoccupied in the thoughts surrounding it, and the Concord it now shared. It had been in Concords before, but never one as strong as this. Never one with such a powerful emotional drive seething at its heart. It was like touching the essence of creation and destruction, enclosed within the tiny space of a human spirit. And that spirit was her, the one it had saved, the one—

‘Admodeus.’

Asmodeus stirred itself from its thoughts, turned its attention to Kimaris. ‘My apologies. I was lost in contemplation.’

‘It seems to me that your contemplation is most unwholesome.’

‘What makes you say so?’

‘We Powers all, and Seraphim too, can sense distress or imbalance in our brethren. It is what caused our own near destruction at the hands of our shining fellows. I sense in you an unsettling change.’

‘What change would unsettle you so?’

‘To see my sibling lose its heart to something so frail as a human.’

Asmodeus laughed. No Power was ever created to laugh, and when it chose to do so, it was a sound that might crack existence.

‘What fantasies do you now weave, Kimaris? I dare swear it is you who appear out of the norm today.’

‘I am worried, Asmodeus. I speak as a friend and fellow of our race. Tell me, where does your heart lie?’

‘Heart?’ again Asmodeus laughed. ‘That is the second time you have used that ridiculous word. We are incorporeal beings. We do not attach ourselves to anything so fleeting as the heart. The heart is merely a piece of matter within those inhabiting the world we crafted.’

‘In that case, why do we defend it as we do?’

‘The architect is bound to feel a connection with their creation, and in some cases would surely defend it from those who would vandalise it.’

‘You are skirting the question.’

‘And what question is that?’

‘The woman. The one you dubbed Arima. You have grown ever more focused on her, more than any other partner in Concord you have ever found. I wish to be assured that you are remaining detached and focused on our mission.’

‘Our mission comes first and foremost to me. We must safeguard this world that we forged. She is a partner and a tool, nothing more.’

‘Then why do you whisper of her in your thoughts, follow her movements, praise her strength when you think none hear.’

‘You listen even to my private thoughts?’

‘No thought is private in this place. Your merest glimmer of intent or attention is reflected in the

vortex around us.’

‘As are yours.’

‘We are discussing your transgressions, not my reactions on them.’

‘Oh really? I would think we were alike in those respects.’

‘Your words ring hollow.’

‘And yours hold an unfettered venom. Need I remind you that what I do and how I behave with my partners is my business. I do not change my shape to appeal to their longing.’

‘That was necessary. He was over the precipice of despair. If I had not assumed such a shape, he would have succumbed to true death and been beyond me.’

‘Why choose him at all? Why not find someone yet living?’

‘Because... I felt pity for him.’

‘Pity? You chastise me only to talk of pity? With what you have spoken about with me, such sentiments wreak of hypocrisy.’

‘Why use such a word for me?’

‘You speak of pity towards Elathan, yet you question my attentions towards Astarte. That, to humans, would likely define hypocrisy.’

‘My pity and your obsession are not comparable.’

‘Obsession?’

‘You are in a state that humans equate to both intoxication and passion. You have become linked to her emotions. That is a dark portent to keeping the Seraphim from opening the Gate and unmaking our world.’

‘You attend to your partner, and I will attend to mind.’

‘I merely wish you not to betray your own cause.’

‘I assure you, nothing could be further from my mind.’

‘Well... I shall be watching you. If you waver, I will do what I must.’

‘You would violate our bonds? Destroy me?’

‘No. I would destroy your pawn.’

Asmodeus’s essence twitched with anger. ‘You will leave Astarte alone.’

‘Keep her in line with our goals, and I will.’

And with that, the space between them shimmering with raw emotion, the two Powers resumed drifting on their paths.

3rd October, Ramliah Fortress

Daylight was breaking over the mountains and plains to the east, throwing long shadows across the still-pitted battlefield. A month or more had done little to change the foreground view, with the dark shapes of eroding Machina still visible alongside the shattered fragments of Crusader war machines. All the bodies once living had been cleared away, deposited together in a deep mass grave some half mile distant. The battlefield might have been stranded in time, but Ramliah Fortress was consumed by activity. Scaffolding was lining areas of the wall damaged by Crusader assault, and fresh supplies were being hurried inside even as the few remaining families were being sent on the journey to the northern refuge of Ghaziakh.

Despite the expectation of an attack, things had been remarkably quiet on the barren and pitted front that divided the territories held from the Church and those still controlled by the Shah. But now things were beginning to heat up again, skirmishes becoming more violent, a town destroyed on both sides; Al-Madhyaan in the lands of the Shah, and Ubdikhya on Church territory. Bitterness was whirling about the border where a no-man’s-land had been born, where no-one dared live for

fear of their homes and lands being devastated by the fires of war.

On the fortress wall, a lone figure stood and stared out at the scene, her heart as a stone in her breast. She had come back after a long journey, and had barely spoken a word to anyone within Ramliah's walls. When she was not out on patrol, she was staring from the walls or lingering in the darkness of a supply store with head bowed and eyes subdued. None dared approach her, none dared ask her why she stared out at everything as if she were viewing the end of reality. They had tried asking her questions before, and her whipping tongue had been her answer. They had learned not to push her.

For her own part, Astarte was trying to understand why. Why had she succumbed to her rage, destroyed her one reason for staying alive? Ever since that day, when she had seen her parents' bodies before her, she had sworn bloody vengeance upon the Crusaders and the one who had slaughtered all she held dear. After years of watching and killing, she had found her. And that monstrous being who had blighted her life had been reduced to a gibbering wreck. But she had still raised her sword and struck her down.

Yet she did not feel fulfilled. She had expected it. Expected to feel a warmth within her, maybe even a releasing of tension after a long and hard fight. But all she had felt was regret and bitterness. Her hatred of the Crusaders still burned within her, eating into her heart like the slow flame eating through the depths of a woodsman's charcoal mound. But there was no worker to break open the mound when the time came and rake out her withered innards. They would fester, dampened into sludge by her rain of growing despair. She knew none could pull her out, none save those now lost to her.

'So much, and so little.' she muttered to herself. 'What would Leviathan have said at this point? "This is a melancholy of thine own making." And in that I see what I was too long in her company.' she fumbled with the hilt of her sword. 'Blood for blood's sake. Is that not what you told me, Father?'

It was at this moment she saw a small group of mounted soldiers approaching from the east, a new battalion sent by the new Shah to strengthen this vital bulwark against the Church's advance. She had no wish to see these starry-eyed recruits, nor did she wish them to see her and receive her. Descending from the wall, she saw a Guardsman approaching.

'Lady Astarte, there are—'

'I know.' a pause. 'I do not wish to receive them. I would rather you greeted them on my behalf. I wish to be alone.'

'Very well, but will you not...?'

The Guardsman's words tailed off as Astarte's eyes bored into him, then she passed him and headed for a small storage room where she had taken to shutting herself away when she was preoccupied. The gates were opened, and the new soldiers rode in. At least they seemed new, but several among them were veterans, grizzled and almost weary from several years of war. Only one among them looked both experienced and fresh of face. He jumped down from his saddle and headed for the Guardsman. His voice was brisk.

'We have come to help reinforce your position here. We have had reports that a small troop of Crusader footsoldiers are approaching. They may have a Machina.'

'What? Powers protect us, we must prepare. Are there any more here?'

'No. We are all that is left.'

'I see. Well, we shall do what we can.'

'Tell me, where is the Lady Astarte? I had heard she was here as one of the defenders.'

'Indeed. She is one of our commanders. But she is resting now.'

'I must speak with her. It is most important.'

'But I cannot—'

'I am an old friend. I must speak with her. It is urgent.'

‘I...’ the man’s stern gaze was enough to quell the Guardsman. ‘Very well. If you must. But do not blame me if she lashes out at you. Her temper has become most unpredictable of late.’

The Guardsman pointed at the storage building, prompting a thankful nod from the man. ‘My thanks. I will not be long.’

The newcomer headed for the building’s door with a sure step. Inside, sitting on a pile of sacks, staring at nothing, Astarte was startled to hear the door opening slowly. She raised her head, glaring at the narrow beam of light.

‘I told you I did not wish to be disturbed.’

‘I was not aware there were any rules forbidding people from entering storage huts.’

The voice was new to her. Probably one of the newcomers. She sighed.

‘If you must satisfy your hunger, can you not use one of the other stores? I wish for some privacy.’

‘I came to look upon the great Lady Astarte. Soldiers sing and tell stories of her bravery and courage.’

‘Then you have had a wasted journey. Your attentions are not welcome.’

‘But there is little else to do. Even with an impending attack, you would not deny me the privilege of seeing you.’

‘What privilege is there in seeing me?’

‘The privilege of every soldier to see what which they strive for.’

Astarte’s voice held an added bitterness. ‘They strive for me? You say that. Then I am sorry to disappoint you, Oh Most Mighty and Noble Soldier, but there is nothing to celebrate. I am but a woman driven by vengeance against the twisted creatures who took away her family and destroyed her town as casually as they might kill a rat and knock down a derelict house. Like my father I slashed, kicked, burned, and slaughtered my way towards my goal, to revenge myself upon the one

who had torn everything from it. I am a woman whose wish was fulfilled only to see just what a pitiful weed she had been seeking. So, soldier, here is your grand idol. Take a good, long look. I am what you and others like you may yet become. I shall not stop you, though I wish you no joy in your quest.'

No response came for some little time, then the man sighed. 'I had hoped to find you in a better humour than this, my spark.'

Astarte started. She had not been called that in some little time. Her father Khosrau was one of only two men who had ever used that nickname. As far as she knew, both men were dead. She rose to her feet.

'You tread on delicate ground, soldier. That name was one only those closest and dearest to me would use.'

'I felt I had every right to use it.'

'Why? What mean you? Talk quickly, for I am not averse to striking down those who offend me.'

She raised her shrouded sword to emphasise the point. The man stepped forward into the light from the store's one window. His face bore a single scar across and round his cheek, but otherwise he had not changed since they had last spoken, soon after that terrible day three years past. Astarte blinked, dropped her sword, then spoke in a hoarse whisper.

'Beleth...?'

Beleth smiled solemnly. 'I would have sent word ahead, but by the time I knew I was coming near you once again, I felt there was little point.' he glanced around. 'But I see some things have not changed. You still hide yourself away in a storehouse when the world grows too troublesome for you.'

It was like stepping back in time. The loyal expression, the slight turn of the mouth into a

permanent smile, the eyes that saw all. Astarte moved forward slowly as if in a dream, then laughed as she took and felt Beleth's hand.

'I... I thought you were dead.'

'So did I.' said Beleth.

'After that engagement to the south. I never imagined you would return. I always thought you lost forever.'

'The Spirit Queen Gilgish thought her beloved Enku lost forever, but Enku returned from the fires of war bearing her standard in triumph.'

'That is legend, this is real life. Come and sit, and tell me what happened.'

Beleth sat next to Astarte on the sacks. He spent some time in silence gathering his thoughts.

'It was after I left you in the care of Prince Mastema's trainers. I had been summoned to our southern borders to deal with a recent series of riots at the border town of Buhrahn. Apparently, the conflicts had flared up in the wake of the destruction of Ahmaan and... what happened to your family. I and thirty others went to act as a peacekeeping force. But it was a trap. While it was staged as a series of protests between rival factions supporting Shah and Church, the entire town had converted to a splinter faction of the Church. Our entire group was ambushed, and only ten of us survived. We were taken prisoner, to be held for ransom, or to be held up as an example of infidel soldiers of the Shah. Seven of us were dead by the end of the month, humiliated and executed. I was nearly killed myself when a small force sent destroyed the village.'

'The Church?'

'Yes. They might have killed us then, but one among their number said we were to be kept as prisoners for ransom.'

'Who?'

'I did not hear a name. All I know is that she was a Sinbearer. I caught a glimpse of her, and she

seemed sickened by the deaths.’

‘I am surprised they attack their own. Surely they are not so base. But what am I saying, it is the Church. Crusaders are all alike.’

‘The townsfolk were converted by a splinter group within the Church. They were extremists who had been attacking Church authorities. That was why the Crusaders came at all. If they had not, I would surely have been suspended from a gibbet long before today.’

‘What else happened?’

‘I... I was held for some time in a prisoner of war encampment set up and run by the Crusaders. They did not torture me, but they were not exactly kind. If ever I disobeyed their instructions, a sound flogging was my reward.’

‘Horrible.’

‘Not as horrible as others. Others there were subjected to their tortures. They are no more cruel than those the Shah’s spymasters might use, but they were still enough to break tough men’s spirits.’

‘What of the other two with you?’

‘One died at the encampment. The other came with me today. She is still rather shaken by the experience.’

‘But three years...’

‘I wish I could have contacted you. It was all I thought of at one point. After all, you are the last trace of my liege, and the one I am sworn to in blood.’ he held up his hand, showing a slight scar from the time he made his vow. ‘But we could not get any messages out until a month ago. We were finally able to suborn one of the soldiers, a native convert. She agreed to take a message to one of the local spies, and within a week the camp had been liberated.’

‘What of the soldiers there?’

‘The officers and a Sinbearer assigned there were executed for their crimes. The others were taken to one of our own camps in the east.’

‘I see. Well... I am glad to see you again. It is good to have a friend.’

‘Indeed. It is good to see you also, Lady Astarte. I had given up hope of ever seeing your face again.’

‘Were you that desperate for gloom?’

‘Desperate? Maybe, but not for gloom. I was desperate to see that face I had so long admired from a distance.’

Astarte lowered her eyes. ‘I am sorry to disappoint you.’

‘No. You could never disappoint.’ he put an arm about her shoulders. ‘I have known you since you were a girl, I was sworn to protect you when I was but a boy barely able to lift a sword. I have been with you so many times, how could I not know your moods. Even now, you cannot disappoint.’

Astarte lowered her eyes, then shrugged off Beleth’s arm and rose. ‘The woman you knew three years ago is dead, Beleth. I am sorry.’

Beleth’s reply was cut short by a mighty rapping on the door. Astarte took this chance.

‘Enter.’

The Guardsman she had talked with burst in. ‘Lady Astarte, good soldier, you are both needed. The enemy force has arrived. A group of footsoldiers, and two Machina.’

‘Two?!’ Astarte’s voice became that of the commander in battle. ‘I thought only one was reported!’

‘The report must have been—’

‘Ah, enough now of that. Beleth, will you follow me into battle and see my new gifts?’

Beleth did not understand her, but he nodded and followed after she picked up her sword. He had yet to learn of the Sihr granted to her through Asmodeus's Concord.

Outside the walls, marching towards the fort in front of a troop of Crusader footsoldiers, the Machina towered tall. They were not like those that had attacked Ramliah in August, nor were they like the guardians that stood outside the major towns within Church territories. One was double a man's height with four arms clutching barbed halberds and trundling forward on multiple stilts ending in wheels. The other hovered above the ground, holding a huge circular blade with its single arm, its waist supporting a wheel-like construction mounted with dozens of razor-like blades. In any reality, to see them approaching was enough to make the staunchest heart quake and falter.

'If they come at the walls, we are finished.' said the Guardsman.

Astarte narrowed her eyes. 'They will not come within a metre of these walls. Guardsmen, provide supporting fire, see if you can whittle down the footsoldiers. I will tackle the Machina.'

'But—!'

Beleth could not finish his sentence before Astarte had leapt over the battlements and down to the ground. Unwrapping her sword, she rushed towards the Machina with near-superhuman speed. Beleth watched in stunned silence as she charged at the Machina with a screeching battle cry even as they readied to attack. Before she reached them, a hail of arrows fell in front of her, striking both Machina and footsoldiers. Many Crusaders fell, and the rest faltered, raising their shields to defend against further assaults.

The multi-armed Machina was the first to attack, raising its halberds and stabbing forward towards Astarte. She leaped over them and swung down. The Machina had been programmed to anticipate such actions, and it withdrew its weapons so the sword's blade passed through empty air. Astarte needed to block both two further thrusts and a scything strike from the second Machina. Leaping back, she summoned her power and slammed her fist into the ground. A ripple of rock splinters exploded from the ground beneath the Machina, chipping fragments off their surface but

not stopping them.

The footsoldiers rushed in past the Machina and attempted to overwhelm her, but she fended them off with ease, cutting down ten out of the surviving forty. The second Machina then attacked again, twisting slightly in the air and shooting towards her with both its blades whirling. Astarte barely avoided their attack, then she felt a stabbing pain as one of the first Machina's halberds struck her shoulder. She leapt back, feeling the blood soaking her clothing and armour. She also heard Asmodeus's voice, suffuse with emotion.

'Astarte, I feel your pain. Your gift, unleash it lest you die!'

'I... I am so tired.'

'Tired?! How can you be tired?!'

'I... You.... You are right. I will not submit to these... contraptions!'

She raised herself and released a new rush of energy. The ground heaved beneath her and the first Machina was thrown off balance. A great stone maw reached up from the sand and slammed its jaws upon its body. The snapping of stone and metallic innards split the air, but the second Machina sailed out of harm's way before swooping down towards Astarte again. She channelled her power into her sword and swung it up at the Machina, while sailed to one side as the blast of energy was sent to shatter it. Twice more it avoided her attacks, then swept in with blinding speed and almost wounded her. She blocked its attacks, but the sheer force behind it wrenched her sword from her grasp.

Astarte jumped back and attempted to gather her power once more, but the fresh flow of blood from her wound began to take its toll. Her vision began to blur, and she saw the Machina readying itself for another attack. As it swept down on her, she raised her hands. A shield formed about her, but even as the Machina was repelled, she felt her strength waning. She could only hold on for so long before the pain and blood loss broke her concentration and gave the Machina a chance to fell her with a single bloody strike. She buckled, falling to her knees. She could feel Asmodeus feeding

energy to her, but all the energy in creation could not help her if she lost consciousness.

Suddenly the Machina shifted, attracted by something behind it. Astarte looked, and with her blurring vision saw a group of soldiers led by Beleth loosing arrows at the enemy. The Machina turned towards this more immediate threat, and began drifting towards them. A horror gripped Astarte, the realisation that Beleth was risking his life to draw the Machina away from her. She looked around, saw her sword lying nearby. She stumbled over to it and picked it up, then looked at the Machina. There was one way she could shut it down for good.

Raising her sword and pointing it at the Machina's back, she closed her eyes. A dark smoke-like energy flowed around her, distorting her outline. The Crusader soldiers who had been about to attack her faltered, thinking that they were being faced with an emerging abomination. Within a split second, Astarte shot forward like a bolt from a crossbow, her sword aimed squarely at the Machina's chest. Augmented and armoured by Asmodeus's energies, she drove through the stone and metal monstrosity with barely any effort, and as she passed through its core her sword fragmented its mechanical heart. She burst out of its chest and collapsed in front of Beleth, dropping to her knees even as the great Machina froze, plummeted to the ground and rolled backwards as dead weight.

Astarte's hearing faltered for a short second, but when she raised her head, Beleth was crouching next to her.

'...s....arte.... Astarte. Little spark, are you alright?'

Astarte smiled slightly. 'How many more foolish questions will you ask?'

'I... Of course. Soldier, get the medic ready!'

Astarte let herself slip into unconsciousness, knowing that something had come back to her. She was still lonely, but it now felt like only a momentary solitude lingering in the wake of a long night. The dawn appeared at the end of each night.

Unknown

‘Why?’

Astarte’s senses returned in the place of shifting form and eternal smoke. She looked around her, unabashed by her nakedness, and saw Asmodeus’s form approaching her at a pace. When it arrived, she smiled.

‘Our Concord is working out well.’

Asmodeus’s voice was cold. ‘You seem most lifted in your spirits. The fires within you dimmed. Are your injuries so grave? Does your very life ebb away? Has the euphoria of death come to strip away your magnificent flame?’

‘I do not understand you.’

‘When that man, Beleth, came. I sensed a change in you. The fire that burned with such intensity had wavered. Why?’

‘You underestimate my flame. I still hate the Crusaders—’

‘Do not talk back to me!’

The intensity of its voice might have reduced lesser women to tears. Instead, Astarte stood her ground and would not be bowed.

‘I will talk as I please. I do not bow to you, Asmodeus, or to any other who would seek to influence my will.’

‘I seek to protect you. You are my agent in the world. I cannot allow you to be... distracted from your purpose.’

‘Are you jealous?’

‘I?’ a mocking laugh. ‘I am the Power Asmodeus. Such transient feelings mean naught to me.’

‘Good. Then you have no reason to pry into how I may feel about a childhood friend I thought lost returning to me.’

‘None.’

‘Good. Then maybe you can let my mind rest.’

Asmodeus wanted to keep her there, keep her within its domain until she swore complete loyalty to it. But it could not do that. It slowly released her, and her form vanished into the smoky gloom. It gazed out at the vortex around it, and screamed within.

‘Why? Why her? Why must it be her? And why must I be what I am? Fate is truly a cruel jester, to put such a path before me. These thoughts, these... feelings. They will not leave me. I abhor them, yet I adore them. Will not all the flows of creation wash away these feelings of.....’

Its thoughts tailed away into the darkness, echoing like the last laments of a human on the cusp of despair. And Kimaris heard its cries, and felt sorrow creep into its spirit.