

# The Stone

c. 3910 RM

## 1

Finally, the stone was his.

He'd crossed half the known world, skirting across borders and dredging through the hinterlands between nations, following distant echoes and suspicions. Shadows and glimpses that less astute individuals might have missed had guided him this far. First, the rot and decay of Vârr. How many of its abandoned quarries and mines had he catalogued? How many of their discarded treasures had he sifted through, rejected, ultimately forgotten? In the black waters of Propontis he searched, wading in the ruin of dead civilizations. Across shores thick with rotten fish, rusting hulks, and other unidentifiable things.

Sometime, those shores had been alive, thriving with the exchange of nature, the prosperity of disparate cultures far-removed from the present. Yet that time had passed long ago, and was now nought but maddening recollections, as-though designed to embitter the descendants of such times.

The decay of Propontis ultimately led to the Gravelfields of Ulenyat on old Nárthel. There the shambled remnants of ancient stone-offering plains survived in solitude far from the dead shores of the Inner Sea, closer to the sky than any formation in eyesight. There, he met mute nomads who showed him the crumbled palaces of the lithagogues who once ruled that place. In those ruins: further clues, another push onwards.

For years he went on: the sunken city of Ephrath; across the Sea of Tiama on a junker barge; a sojourn in Solonia, city of the extinct Saoshyants, where secrets of the Demiurges and their worship were revealed to him; then east along remnants of the old merchant route known as the Great Road. Three-hundred miles on: the Black River, where thousands of years past the mythic city of Carula was sacked, its library destroyed, the ink from its drowned tomes marring the river black for years later. Then the spent diamond mines of Delomig, and over a thousand miles east of Ephrat: Argea, capital of Sarastro. Bathed in decadence and surrounded by opulence, he lingered there, longer perhaps than morality dictated, making a home away from home of the myriad alleys and maroon pear-domes. Then, his obsession rekindled by tales of a Merakhian itinerant, he continued east to the Princes' City, where old journals and trinkets gathered along the road were traded for a valuable codex, of which only one page interested him; a page mentioning in passing, as though it meant nothing, a great craftsman named Vorropohaiah.

Just to see that name in print had rendered him ecstatic, the folly of the offhanded comment, the dissonance of its context unimportant. That one of the Two-and-Twenty Demiurges of old – the worker-deities worshipped by ancient mortals – had been confused with a mortal craftsman was near-sacrilege, but the mistake had allowed the passage to survive unmolested for so many years, surviving burning, destruction or the bookcases or demure collectors who understood not what they kept under lock-and-key.

With that new knowledge a trail that had grown sterile was rekindled and Baruch was once more invested with the purpose necessary to carry on.

The Princes' City turned his journey around, and he was heading west again, back towards the Inner sea, north via Merakhi, then west along the southern coast of the Dark Sea. Through Mulciber, better known as the Snaking City; onwards to rural Phenex; Kairor and its massive temple-complexes; Dacia and its shadow-itinerants. Then north, into Lydria; the recycled troglodyte city of Amaymon.

Amaymon, where brutish peasants rubbed shoulders with mystic augur-rulers. Amaymon was truly a place of two halves. Though defiant of the empire throughout its existence, it had survived as an echo of Korachani culture. A caste of slave-like troglodytes lived in relative frugality in the labyrinthine city, the raw materials of its construction pillaged from the ruin of a far more illustrious city that had been crippled millennia past. While the plebs and masses lived aimlessly in the city, the ubyrns ruled from above. They enjoyed a life that the troglodytes below rarely had the pleasure or comfort to even dream of.

Amaymon, where the pagan beliefs of the troglodytes survived, carried on the backs of bucolic dynasties and generations of skull-wearing trogeins. Their rituals and ceremonies, little more than heathen theatricalities, belied a sophistication that flowed from the teachings of Lyridian overlords; the augurs, mystics and seers of near-divine renown. And at their head, the Great Sibyl, whose prophecies and forecasts had shaped the world, driving the wax and wane of nations, the ebb and flow of wars. Her shadow covered all of Lyridia and fear of her gaze was something that travellers and natives alike had to grow used to, for none could claim to never have felt the weight of her scrutiny upon their shoulders. Many in Lyridia dreamt of being watched, the distant machinations of that ancient being drifting into dreams, polluting thoughts and disturbing reveries. Her presence was felt everywhere, if not through the weight of legends that surround her, then the enforcement of her laws. Though a lax ruler by most accounts, her rarely-heard words remain law and those who break them are made harsh examples of.

Indeed, though rarely believing of such things, Baruch had been apprehensive since setting foot in Lyridia, even more so in Amaymon. White-robed enforcers of the augurs were symbols of the Sibyls' reach and though they were few in numbers, their influence was blatant. Amaymon quiet, its roads solemn places of contemplation and... fear. Its markets and wide arcades were serious places where trade, rather than gossip, marked the rule of the day. For a secular place, there was a lot of piety in Amaymon and the way people worked and behaved. It was unsettling.

It was in Amaymon that Baruch had found the stone. An old quarry in the southern prairies of Iblis had given up the treasure to a group of child-prospectors. The ignorant fools – troglodyte parentage painted plainly on their simplistic behaviour – had parted with it for money that, in all likelihood would be confiscated by the white-ropes within a week, unless they had the imagination to squander it first.

Now Amaymon sat, scrutinising it beneath his jewellers' lenses.

"They are identical!" he repeated, the words having become more of a litany than means of communication.

His apprentice nodded absently as he sat in a corner, scrolls and books and maps spread around him.

“Well, not identical, of course. That would be foolish. But the workmanship, the material, the angles of the edges, the veins. Even the shaping of the runes, the strokes, the size. All is identical. I can match this to the same region in Vârr that the others were found in, perhaps even the same mine in Hulka. Perhaps it is even part of the same rod. Amazing.”

The apprentice looked up. The words were the same whenever a new discovery was made. He had grown used to it, the swings in behaviour. Elation and amazement upon a new discovery would quickly be whittled away by time and inactivity, poor dealings, negative research, into apathy and, when funds began to run low, frustration, anger, and violence. He ignored it, for the most part, though he wasn't churlish enough to mention it or feeble enough to let the violence pass unopposed when it migrated from the inane punching of inanimate objects into something altogether more harmful.

The vices of a genius. Or perhaps the decadence of a madman, he would sometimes wonder. Whatever, he didn't care. All that mattered was that he received his journeyman's papers at the end of it all, and, perhaps, tenure as an assistant in the college in Raalo.

“Makes you wonder what its journey was. What, if it could talk, it would choose to tell us. What a history. What things you must have seen,” he said, lifting the thing away from his lenses and holding up against the light.

It was not as opaque as casual scrutiny had led him to believe. The light penetrated it, diffusing in a dark green murk through which he gazed. Its veins were thick and seemed to hang suspended in the amber-like substance as though there were some form of design involved in their creation.

Baruch shook his head as he placed the stone on its leather mat. He took notes absently, jotting thoughts and queries onto paper lest the torrent of questions and observations that came to him nullify one another. The discovery of the stone posed more questions than it answered, but if there was one thing they did, it was point north-and-west, to Vârr.

“Apprentice,” said the man, his voice suddenly louder than its usual soliloquist mumblings. “Tell the porters to gather our things. We travel to Vârr.”

The boy nodded, lifting his head from a map of the region in question, his interest genuinely piqued. “And you master?”

“Our last escorts being less than reliable, I think the need for new guards is at hand. Expect me presently apprentice, For we leave tomorrow.”

*Presently*, thought the apprentice? *Doesn't that mean now?* He pushed the thought – a mere triviality – aside and returned to his work. There was no point rushing these things. He had grown used to the master over the years. The enthusiasm of a child. The attention-span to match. No doubt, three months down the line they would still be in Amaymon, chasing some new clue.

#

The sprawl of Amaymon was not Baruch's idea of a comfortable stay and the quicker he left the place, the better. The locals – troglodytes, imperial texts called them (and with reason, too) – were little more than simple brutes, their features base, their culture without the artistic expression

deemed necessary by scholars to quantify them as a true civilised people. They just made up the numbers of Lyridia; the body. The true heart of that nation, if nation it could be called, were the augurs and ubyrns, and descendants of past imperial occupiers and wielders of a far more ancient divining tradition. Relatively few in numbers, Baruch doubted more than a few thousand augurs existed across Lyridia. That was the way power was split there – the so-called seers and their gold, and the troglodytes, with a middling merchant class between them. It was a strange configuration that Baruch could not really understand. From what he saw as he reconnoitred, the place relied on outside trade – an oddity in Lyridia. Though not a place of opulence, was relatively rich – trogs and slaves laboured in gold mines; the raw extract of which was hoarded by the ubyrns specifically for trade. A steady inflow of foreign goods kept inflation down. Foreign merchants operating in Lyridian markets enjoyed many diplomatic advantages (in exchange for levies, of course), not least of which were cheap export prices. It was that trade, unseen by most in the Augury Halls of what few true cities claimed that land, that kept Lyridia alive. Not that the trogs ever realised. Or cared. Or benefitted.

The place was a glorified slum, considering it was one of the largest conurbations in Lyridia. For Amaymon wasn't truly a single city, but rather dozens of smaller settlements built in close proximity to one another, each slowly growing over the years until borders became blurred, outskirts meshed, wards mingled. The hinterlands between districts were little more than semi-permanent shanties and outcast conclaves, but the uncertain days of integration were something now consigned to poetry and literature – at least what passed for such in Lyridia – and Amaymon was enjoying a time of relative prosperity, even as the rest of the world crumbled around it. Still, prosperity wore various guises.

After the places Baruch had visited – Sarastro amongst them indelibly etched on his memories – Amaymon seemed somewhat backward. Buildings, largely mud-built (strange for the latitude), hugged each other as much for support as out of cultural design, vaulted alleys leading through them. They sprawled for acres, encompassing far more land than most cities sharing a similar or smaller population. The reason? Evident in the unadventurous scope of their construction – two, three storey structures at most, and even then, the norm was for low one- or two-room hovels. A few stone municipal buildings loomed above the petty structures, their shade lingering longer across the streets than those of others, though for the most part, Amaymon was a city of a single level.

The streets, long and narrow, were still, its populace seen and never heard. Its markets were muted, the near-universal call of hawkers and vendors missing, replaced with the soulless clamour of merchandise and braying of animals that knew no better. And tying the silence together was the ever-present white-robos: both slaves and soldiers of the augurs.

It was the Simontine Market that Baruch was aiming for, named after one of the Nine Watchers – the mystic Abulia, tools through which the Sibyl could perform her Art.

Shuffling figures locked eyes with his as he walked, brows furrowing with inimical stares. At first Baruch thought the looks to be envious; bitter people cursing the foreigner who, once done with the blandness of Amaymon was fortunate enough to return to his life outside its crumbling walls. If only they knew how dark the world had become, they would be looking upon him with pity, rather than jealousy. If they had seen a fraction of the death he had, the withering of the world, the unravelling of nature... perhaps then they would understand that isolation was not as harsh a mistress as they had come to know her as.

But, as he left streets and alleys in his wake, his trail taking him closer to the particular district he had heard of, he began to reinterpret those looks. What he had thought to be envy of a man unanchored by the augurs and the meek existence fate had bestowed upon them, turned into apprehension. No longer were they thinking 'why is this man here, when he can be elsewhere?' instead they were thinking 'what is this man doing here?'

Outsiders were uncommon. Merchants from Nárthel and Pelasgos were tolerated – welcomed, even – but others, freemen they called them in their base tongue, were viewed with distrust. What unclean thoughts did they bring with them? What sorcerous secrets from without did they carry? Technarcana, Penumbriism, Firmamentism even; none of those things were common or accepted in Lyridia – outside of the grasp of the Augurs, at least. To make contact with such things was unwise; as decreed by the Augurs. The stymie of outside knowledge was something widely controlled by the white-robos, whose purgation sermons were all that was needed to rid Amaymon of unwanted memories of without. Baruch and his apprentice had been subjected to interrogations and searches, none of which he thought were necessary, before being allowed into the city.

Now here he was, an outsider in a land where the outside was unwelcome, walking the streets alone. Searching for escorts to help provide safe passage when they were outside again. Madness.

He found the place; an unassuming building nestled between two warehouses in a district whose name his tongue could not wrap itself around, whose purpose seemed manifold. All he could see was a large wooden door. Steps led down into darkness, a large balcony watching over him, the glint of eyes observing him unsettling. The sign beside the door, a simple pictogram as dictated by a largely illiterate population, showed a knife and fork crossed over a simple straw cot.

Inside, the air was smoky, pungent. The only portal to the outside world was the door he had come in from. A single lantern flickered wildly above a central counter that enclosed a troglodyte, his thick brow and brutish arms making him look like a trapped animal. But behind the thick dome, the coarse hair, there dawdled an intellect that set him apart from animals.

The place was a sleeping hall, huge stone pillars holding aloft a roof that rested on fanning beams. Large padded chairs filled the room, most of them home to unmoving trogs. The stay was free, so long as one found an empty space and neighbours that tolerated ones' company. There was no guaranteeing that he would get up after sleeping, not that he imagined he would ever fall asleep in such a place. That was why Baruch had had to stay in a dwelling sponsored by a local governor.

He approached the counter, ignored the barrels of drink behind it and gestured to the troglodyte. His grasp of their language was meagre at best, though it was so simplistic that he was still able to communicate with success.

"Men for hire?" he said, his hand-gestures as much a part of the question as his words.

The troglodyte nodded to a corner of the room. There was little to see in the smoke-laden air, but Baruch thanked the man and ventured onwards.

Where the rest of the clientele was laconic, either drinking in silence or sleeping, the men here were more... expressive. Though hardly loud, they were clearly awake, drinking, talking. Some sat huddled around a tiny table that could barely manage the mass of cards and dice arrayed on it. Others just sat, drinking, listening to the tales of others. Most smoked from stiff long-necked pipes.

Off-duty guards, porters, and escorts relaxing away from their caravans. Mercenaries, rogues for-hire. He knew few would give him a second thought here, where crossed glances were as often as not likely to end in brawls as they were ignorance. He surveyed the room, lifting his cloak aside with a hand, allowing a hand to brush softly against a pouch of local coin. He had heard this was the way to do it, and he wasn't about to break tradition over something he thought was foolish. In Azazem, to go into a merc-haunt like this flaunting your money, you could call yourself lucky to leave the place alive, not to mention with your money. He thanked the Throne for his knowledge of local customs.

He filtered through the troglodytic brutes and spied two figures quite unlike the others. One was a true grotesque, a being of no certain heritage; an alien, a true scion of the disparate lands of Elyden.

Its face was dominated by a strong elongated nose that widened into two flaring nostrils above which a pair of wet black eyes surveyed the room in torpid glances. Gangly arms motioned lazily as the figure spoke, their ropey strength clear despite the myriad belts and straps that covered them. Its legs were thick, short, jointed in ways more befitting an animal than a man. Thick layers of hide, fur and burlap covered the being, fixed together with belts and baldrics, each stitched meticulously together in a tight but dense armour Baruch did not doubt was effective. An alien stench surrounded the creature, not altogether unpleasant but... disturbing, as though bringing to the fore the disparate nature of the beast-man. Its voice, kept low against the sombre surroundings, was deep though underpinned by a sonorous almost melodic foundation that kept Baruch enthralled.

The creature was seated on one of those long cot-like chairs, talking to a second figure. This time it was more than an outlandish appearance that enthralled the scholar. If he was right, he knew he had found his escorts. There was no doubting it. The gigantic frame, the alabaster skin, the scars, the bald head and dark eyes. The sculpted features – cheeks and chin as though of marble – and countenance of the man, if man he could be called, struck a chord with the scholar, as though he were meant to recognise him from somewhere.

He shook the notion aside and concentrated instead on the obvious. "Gentlemen," he said, regretting the world instantly. Did mercenaries respond to such pleasantries? Or was he expected to slap their backs and curse the heathens, exclaiming upon the features of harlots and barmaids he had no experience with? Regardless, it was too late. He had their attention and as he moved towards the table saw two pairs of eyes regarding him, one perfect (perhaps too perfect, in hindsight, to be of a man born in the empire) and another, altogether more disturbing. Large, long thin lashes batting above Cimmerian orbs.

The thing snorted as the giant cocked his head to one side, eyes fixed intently on Baruch.

"Well," said the pale giant, "the Tikbala are not known for their patience. If you are to disturb one, then make the reason good."

The creature laughed, its horse-like head shaking as it slammed a stunted hand on the table, its stubby fingers with their thick dark nails balled into fists.

"Money," said Baruch, the revelation of the creature's race lost to nervousness.

The Tikbala nodded. "Come sit and explain this money concept to me."

Baruch nodded and sat, unsure of what the thing meant. In his anxiety he took the words at face-value and ignored context, humour, and began explaining the rudiments of monetary exchange, currency, economy.

“Does humour not exist amongst your people?” said the Tikbala. “Sit and tell us about the job. That is why you’re here?”

“Yes, yes,” said Baruch. “I am in need of an escort.”

“An escort? There’s a brothel somewhere a few streets away,” said the Tikbala.

“Indeed. Let me rephrase. I need guards. I am planning a journey into Vârr, across the Propontis. I need guards for the caravan.

“Where you going?”

“Nouvatai, most likely. I am not entirely sure yet, though we may need to travel farther north.”

“How far north?” said the other figure, “If we are to offer our services we must know the details. Is this a trade venture? Contraband, Food? A slaving caravan? Will we be travelling with Penumbrists, other mercs?”

Baruch had dealt with caravan guards before. Normally they asked about the money and agreed, without bothering to ask much else. There was more to this man than that. “I am a scholar. The minutiae of my vocation will be of unlikely interest to you, but your questions are fair. I seek records of an extinct culture that existed here some millennia ago. Many months of travel and research have brought me full circle, back to the place where I began my search – Vârr. There is nothing illicit in my activities. I have full authorisation; passport, warrants, letters of marque, proscription papers legalising my travels and research within imperial borders and those of her allies.

“Lyridia is no ally of Korachan.”

“Well, quite,” started Baruch. “I have the confidence of various fraternities and institutes, amongst them the colleges of Raalo in Azazem. I seek not to smuggle food or trade in slaves. I just want the assurance of being well-guarded. I may be a man of the lectern, but I am not blind to Elyden’s afflictions. I know she is a dangerous place – I have travelled enough to know that first-hand.”

“How far north?”

“Forgive my impertinence, but what difference does latitude make?”

The Tikbala grinned, though the giant’s features remained unchanged. “As you say, the world is not a safe place. I hear that the north of Vârr, the mountainous regions there, are unsafe.”

Baruch regarded the man for a moment. The mountains of northern Vârr featured prominently in his research. Varrachon, as the chain was called, was the site of various ruined settlements that belonged to the culture he was studying. He had to admit that it was likely that his dealings in Nouvatai might lead him there, but there was something about the giants’ eyes that stayed his tongue. He replied in the negative, saying they would likely remain in the capital or move west.

The mercenary nodded, the need for further words apparently unnecessary.

"I am Baruch of Raalo, aesthete and archaeologist to the governor of the fraternity of colleges in Raalo. I will be travelling with my apprentice and a handful of porters."

"Small group. Good," said the Tikbala. "I am Oro of the Te loshugh realm. And this is Slaven, of nowhere."

Baruch continued, giving further details, most of which were superfluous and uninteresting. He explained that he would pay them 150 bits (a fortune to the troglodytes): 50 up front, the rest upon reaching his benefactor in Novatai. "Then it is decided?"

The pair agreed.

Baruch smiled, eager to get these frustrating trivialities over with and get back to more important matters. He was about to shake hands but opted against the faux pas, deciding instead to give them his elbow; the traditional business gesture in Lyridia. The three touched elbows and Baruch departed after giving them instructions where to meet him the next day.

Slaven was silent as the pair drank. Oro eyed him for a moment, his grotesque smile marring an already alien face. "No need to look so pleased. We just gave the smile to another month of manual labour. I thought that was a good thing." He downed his drink and sank into his chair, closing his eyes. He wasn't even interested in his companion's response. As long as food and drink and accommodation sorted for the foreseeable future, he didn't care.

The other figure fidgeted, unable to make comfortable the small lounge he sat on. "It is not that. What know you of Vârr, Oro?"

"I know that thanks to it we're employed again. I swear, not even the gilded lead of the Throne itself would get me back in those brickyards. It's demeaning. We have a proud history."

*A proud history, thought Slaven, of subjugation and genocide that almost wiped you out.*

Still, he could not help but be lifted by the Tikbala's attitude. Even in the few instances when he had seen Oro provoked into a fight, he had done so with such petulance as to make Slaven wonder if his vocation was one taken out of necessity rather than choice. Then again, who became a sword-for-hire through choice alone? In Slaven's experience it was the world that shaped you, that carved your path. At least, he knew he hadn't come to Lyridia hoping for... this.

No. His life had brought him to Lyridia for many reasons, none of which were the pursuit of a mercenary's life. He had come to forget, to hide. But there was no hiding from his past. Wherever he went it caught up with him. So far, the faceless crowds of troglodytes, the absence of the empire and his own skulking, had kept his presence there secret, but he knew fate had other plans for him. It was time to leave. But... Vârr. He knew things about that place, things he did not like.

He asked Oro about Vârr again. The Tikbala shrugged, eyes still closed. "Imperial conquest farther back than I care to remember. Resources wasted, leaving the place a dry wasteland. People who live there take no shit and are tough, for humans."

Slaven shook his head. "No. Forget that. The empire, the interreges, the regent-kings. Think farther back; ages. Myth."

"What the... what is this about? Don't tell me you're brooding again. If you are, let me know so I can get away from you."



Slaven ignored him. "I have heard dark things about Vârr, about its past. A great evil slumbers there."

"Well if you don't poking about, you won't wake it up."

Another shake of the head. Slaven returned to his drink, knowing he would never get a straight answer out of his companion.

## 2

They left Amaymon without aplomb the next morning, leaving from its northern gate, travelling north along the banks of the great Bini river, its clear waters offering a welcome respite from the clouded water most people were made to drink. It was wide, its waters slow flowing and shallow. The gentle undulations of the land were visible for miles around.

Towards the end of the first day, they encountered a group of mercs heading south across the flat plain. Both parties raised their right hands in sign of neutrality as they approached each other, their weapons visible, shouldered. Slaven had cautioned Baruch and the others before setting out – the road was dangerous. Travellers usually fell into two categories; those driven through desperation or necessity to travel or those too brave or wealthy to know otherwise. Both were tenacious and neither were to be trifled with. The dying man fought savagely for a chance to live. The merchant fought equally well – perhaps more-so – to protect his investments.

The approaching group appeared to be the latter. There were three of them, mounted, with two beasts carrying baggage behind them. Their clothes marked them as foreign men, probably from imperial lands in the west. Wide-brimmed hats, heavy leather dusters, bolt-action magazine-fed rifles. Though the men were filthy, the rifles were spotless, clean as the day they had left the manufactory. As they approached, what at first appeared to be baggage was revealed to be heads; dozens of them, hanging from the hair from straps and belts on their mounts.

Bounty hunters, probably employed by the white-robos to hunt absconding trogs. It was difficult enough entering Lyridian cities. Leaving them was another thing entirely; forbidden to troglodytes, who were expected to live and die in their place of birth. The punishment for those absconding was symbolic; the sundering of head from body and the display of those heads in public areas.

The hunters approached, sun-worn faces grimacing in the light cast by the setting sun. A curt nod from one of them was followed by silence. These were grizzled men, weary from what may have been weeks or months on the road, returning to Amaymon with a prize they were not willing to part with.

There was an awkward moment where the two groups passed each other and stopped. Suspicious glances were traded, examined, abandoned. If malicious intent was at work, it would have panned out. They had the riches of bounty to look forward to; there was no point in them starting fights.

One of them eyed Baruch and nodded again, lifting a hand to the brim of his hat. He removed it, revealing a sweaty brow defaced by a harsh scar, the pocks of past sutures clearly visible. He wiped the brow with a filthy sleeve and replaced the hat. "Road's safe, far as we can tell. Not likely to find any trouble before Soleas. Not trogs, at least," he smiled. One of his companions laughed crudely.

Silence returned. Slaven nodded. There was a tangible pause before he continued. "You are the first bodies we pass since Amaymon."

"Throne-protect you, as it protects us," said one of the bounty hunters as he kicked his steed to life. The others followed him without word.

“Likewise,” said Oro, his words barely audible. Then, when the hunters were without earshot, he spat. “I suggest a double-watch tonight.”

The night past uneventfully, and they approached Soleas early the next day before the sun had reached its apex. The city was old, established as a religious hub and trade centre millennia past when Korachan was little more than seven city-states occupying a singular peninsula.

Soleas was known as the City of Sight, after the long history the Augurs and their Sibyl had there. It was in Soleas that the first Sibyl had risen to power, deposing the rulers of what would in later years fragment and become the states of Lyridia and Nárthel. The dawn of the age of the Sibyl ushered a time of religious strength and prosperity, at the centre of which was Soleas. Temples were erected in which the Augurs would orate and perform their demagoguery. As time progressed and the Sibyl and her Augurs grew more influential, siphoning power from the old governance, Soleas lost administrative powers, becoming a religious base, after which its leadership fractured. In the void left by the withered bureaucracy stepped the Sibyl, leading to a time of unrivalled passion amongst her followers.

Then the empire had come. Soleas was sacked and abandoned in favour of a new political centre farther west. The old guard of the Lyridian religion remained strong in the ruins of Soleas, though it suffered under the imperial yoke. Trade diminished, regions fell to rot and the place was allowed to crumble into a dull echo of its once-great presence.

That was the place Baruch then saw beyond the city walls – a collection of limestone and mud-brick edifices; columnar temples and tarnished marble statues that led melancholically down hills and valleys to the banks of the Bini. There was a sadness about that place, the rows of time-worn foundations and ruins that stretched for miles outside the paltry city-walls reciting a tale of decay and collapse that few who were alive could understand. Hewn streets worn concave by the shuffling of uncounted feet cut through the city like dry veins, connecting silent buildings, bringing a semblance of life to its disparate areas. There was little culture to speak of, save the oratoria dedicated to the Sibyl and the Nine Watchers. A few spires rose tentatively above the low flat-roofed dwellings of the troglodytes, their heavy bronze bells beckoning them to prayer and veneration.

Xenophobia ran rampant in Soleas and the group had a hard time gaining entry. Its walls, low wide limestone things, the design of which was out-dated centuries past, surrounded it, their pitted surfaces and ramshackle appearance hardly evoking a picture of prosperity.

The group had been held at a verdigris-encrusted gate for some time as they awaited a verdict on their status. The guards had refused them entrance, until the arrival of a city-approved spokesperson, as was local custom. Upon the wretch’s arrival they spent hours discussing the nature of their visit, petitioning through their representative with another local administrative who had the right to approve entrance.

“The scars of war,” the administrative said, his skull-like face regarding them as little more than vermin, taut thin lips wrapping themselves with difficulty around the imperial words, “heal slowly here. We do not welcome allies of the old empire. The one who was not born to fleshy womb is an insult to the Sibyl and the Abulia. The right of entry into Soleas is denied.” He said, gesturing to the guards to eject them.

They slept under open skies that night, on golden hills overlooking the solemn corpse of a city that had denied them entry as unseen eyes observed them diligently from walls they could not cross.

Baruch sat eating stale biscuits, eyes transfixed by the dancing flames as the apprentice busied himself cataloguing the days' events. Across from him sat the silent giant. Not once since leaving Amaymon had he seen the man eat. Come to think of it he hadn't noticed him drink, either. Or talk.

The scholar stood and sat beside the giant. For some time, the two sat ignoring each other, the only sound that of the fire crackling beneath open skies. Finally, his food finished, the uneasy silence escalating into an unbearable cacophony, Baruch spoke. "The official, he was talking about you, wasn't he?"

Slaven blinked, his black eyes turning from the flames to the scholar. He was silent for some time before replying. Long enough that Baruch wondered if he would even speak. "The people of Soleas clearly bear a grudge against the empire. An why not? It only managed, in a few short years of battle, to ravage their land and steal its resources."

"You speak of the Three-year war?"

Slaven nodded, "That is what people have come to call it."

"That is an ancient conflict, one that few scholars know of. I only know of it through the diligence of my work on compiling the history of this land. How a sword-for-hire comes across such knowledge, I cannot fathom."

"I have travelled far in my years. I have been here many times, have shared the road with many characters. You learn things on the road."

Baruch shook his head. "No. The one who was not born to fleshy womb. He said those words in reference to you. What did he, an official of a backwater town know about you that I have not yet reasoned? Who are you Slaven, of nowhere?"

"When we took the job there was no talk of such probing. If you want us to finish the job I suggest you leave me be."

"Surely, you must be hungry. I have not yet seen you eat, nor drink. Your pale skin, your size..."

His words were interrupted by the thump of wood on the ground. Oro had returned. "Not much I'm afraid, though there's enough here to keep us going for the night."

Baruch stared at Slaven, whose eyed had darted once more to the dancing flames a simple at that might as well have been an impregnable wall between the two. Baruch knew his curiosity would remain unsated. He stood and joined his apprentice.

"Something I said?" said Oro.

"We should not have taken the job. Already the paper-shuffler suspects something."

The Tikbala eyed him. "What were you expecting. He is a scholar. Can't be the first time someone's sussed you out."

Slaven shook his head. "No, it is not. And rarely does such a discovery end well. It is probably for the best that Soleas would not have us."

"Yes. Doubt they had a decent eatery there anyway. Bloody turnips. If I have to eat another turnip..."

They lay in silence, the open air around them growing colder. Slaven was watching the stars, the thin clouds racing past them, when he spoke again. "I fear we march to our doom Oro."

The Tikbala raised an eyebrow. "You should have been an actor."

"I asked you before we left Amaymon what you knew about Vârr. What know you of the Demiurges?"

"Old myths. Two dozen slave-gods or something."

"Two-and-twenty. And they were no slaves. They shaped Elyden into what it is now, crafting the mountains and rivers and plains from the Shadow and the Helix at the behest of one above them."

Oro looked around, seeing dry plains and barren hills beyond. "Nice work."

"It is said that they fell from grace. They created the perfect world, but were not happy with their work and they continued shaping, destroying the paradise they had once wrought. They were punished for their hubris and, shorn of their divinity were cast down upon Elyden where they became the leaders of men, their abilities still those of a god under the gaze of primitive men.

"But they yearned for divinity once more; the power to carve mountains, to set the course of a river, to shape coastlines and grant life to the manifold creatures they had devised. Some sought forgiveness. Others grew contemptuous of a punishment they knew they were undeserving of. Still others despaired, their minds shattered by the loss of their greater powers.

"Vorropohaiah was one such being. Some say he was greatest creator amongst those Demiurges, that his great works litter Elyden like discarded toys. Some claim the Pyrean Pyramid in northern Lyridia is of his design. The valley of Atalan and its giant monoliths. The pit of Bathanat. The Vorrohagori. And countless others.

"We march above his tomb, where vile secrets are said to be buried."

Oro scoffed "Myths. The Demiurges might once have been real, but that ages past. What was real has been corrupted by time and the one-upmanship of storytellers into something else. Trust me, us tikbalas are up there with the greatest tellers of tales. Every generation the ancestral hero kills that many more enemies and lays that many more women before vanquishing the evil god, each time more quickly and more elaborately than the last. These are stories. Sure, they have meaning and kernels of truth to them, but they're just stories."

"There is divine providence at work here. Vorropohaiah has shaped his people under his own image. An image of despair, madness and decay. And his lands are no different."

"Vorropohaiah?" Oro said. "That name, it reminds me of something. Yes; a mount along Vârr's northern borders – the Varrachon. We camped there once, when I was a slave in a carnival. We were coming out of a dry spell in Korachan, hoping for better things in Vârr. How wrong we were. The

people there are too dour, too close to death to worry about something as trivial as a carnival. We had some small successes in the larger cities but even then, it was nothing like what we needed to stay afloat. The harlequins would drink us dry. The occultists had their own list of requirements, whose costs we could not meet.

“We were following a tributary of the Ichoria north-west past Madour, heading north-east, when we first saw it; a misshapen flat-topped mountain, its sides unnaturally steep and naked. Immediately upon seeing it I recall a sense of dread overcoming me, as though dark portents crowned the place like some foul halo. I was not alone. The beasts proceeded under its shadow with great reticence and only the whips and chiding of the pack-masters would move them. The other freaks – the true freaks, whose bodies were not true to their sires – were similarly agitated, braying and soiling themselves in fear. The performers, too, were unsettled and turned to the Green Fairy, as they so often did, for solace.

“We camped under the seventh Blood Moon of the year – usually a good sign. The performers and harlequins were drinking themselves rowdy around the fire. I could barely see them from my cage, but the sounds of debauched carousing had grown familiar to me and I felt safe behind my bars. When things had quietened down, the bulk of the roustabouts and performers having drunk themselves into a stupor, I remember hearing my keeper and a bomolochus talking about Vârr. Talk inevitably turned to that foul mountain. The bomolochus identified it as the Varrachon and placed its creation in the prehistory of this world, when life was in its first iteration. He said that that great mountain – its barren earth, its misshapen slopes, its aphotic crags – were the result of centuries of toil where millions of slaves and fanatics worked themselves to death ripping tunnels and caverns out of the bedrock of Vârr. The mountain is the great tailings mound of that great effort, one I remember it now was attributed to the whims of one of the old slave-gods.”

“Vorropohaiah.”

“Drunken campfire story.”

“We will see.”

A day out of Soleas they came across the ruin the three hunters had left behind. Strewn across the base of a rocky knoll just off the road was a deserted camp. The place had grown from a temporary encampment to a shanty – semi-permanent structures built abutting the knoll, burlap tents flapping dejectedly in the dead wind. Around the settlement were the headless corpses of perhaps two dozen troglodytes.

They gave the place a wide berth and continued, following the road north and west along the Bini river.

Lyridia was an insular place. People rarely left their own home and when they travelled it was never openly, for those who travelled did so against the wishes of the white-ropes and always had something to hide. The road was lonely, empty, save for the memory of past times that greeted them every so-often in the form of deserted settlements and the ruins of ancient battles. They were deep in the region known to outsiders as the Iblis, where the majority of true Lyridian settlements were scattered. The rest of Lyridia was a collection of cave-dwelling troglodytes and their trogein mystics leaders. Though true, the place was still far from densely populated, as the ruins and open country bore testament to.

Across the river they saw the signs of an ancient battle, the bare skeletons of unidentified warriors half-buried in the hills. There was but one sign of their foe; the carcass of an imperial war machine – a great landship, its carcass rusting under an uncaring sky.

“We may travel different lands and set foot in the homes of disparate cultures, but they are all tied by the same bloody history,” said Baruch as they passed the scene.

### 3

They approached it early on their tenth day out of Soleas, seeing it across a bend in the river, beyond a wide concrete bridge. Immediately it stood as something different to the other settlements they had seen thus far. Where Soleas was a withered ruin and Amaymon was little more than an overgrown shanty, there remained about Vepar a trace of imperial nobility that set it apart from those pitiful places.

Indeed, they had crossed the border and were now in Lyridia Dhai – that westernmost of Lyridian territories that had been annexed by Korachan long ago and abandoned after centuries of abusing its resources. Vepar had been the longest-serving imperial city in Lyridia Dhai. With the region's resources exhausted and little strategic advantage to its maintenance, the place had been left in the care of the interreges about 9-centuries past, where it was allowed to wither. It had been conquered by an umbraphage years later, and grew to become one of three dominant cities in Lyridia Dhai, which together formed a trade-network. It was one of the few places that encouraged growth and welcomed foreign trade even as other settlements shut their doors to merchants.

Walls of steel-capped stone cosseted the city from the world without, the spires and domes of imperial design rising above them in mock-splendour. For, what at first appeared to be a prosperous place was no more than another example of the worlds' slow corruption. The imperial influence of the city served the group well and they were granted entry against a small premium.

It was only once inside that they could see the vast sprawl of the city, which, upon a cursory glance convinced Baruch that hundreds of thousands must have called it home. The great edifices of imperial history were little more than ruins, their walls crumbling, their domes flaking. The clear exception were the steeples and domes of great churches, which seemed in better condition and spoke of a populace that still worshipped the Undying Machine of Korachani.

Grey stone of imperial import rubbed against more recent additions; limestone hovels and simple brick shanties that wound their way about each other like three-dimensional labyrinths, narrow walkways and stairs, skyways and public balconies leading into each other, rows of narrow doors indicating tiny homes beyond and a large population that was densely packed. Roads were narrow, covered in filth; the descendants of troglodytic and proletariat unions filling them in droves that pushed against each other in echo of imperial cities, though the eerie silence of Lyridian culture lingered, if not to the extremes of Soleas and Amaymon.

Though the empire was gone, its traces were all too apparent. The technarcane crafts were evident in the smoke-belching manufactories that loomed over the city in the distance, and the smaller engines that peppered the city at uneven intervals. Barugh peered inside a busy workshop to see a crowd of people waiting in front of a great technarcane engine in which was interred a wretched humanoid figure. The practice was common in many lands, with vat-grown shapers known as larvae grafted into machines to operate them ceaselessly until their bodies collapsed from the strain and toil. Its bald head jerked as unnervingly as stick-tin arms operated an intricate touchpad at caused valves and dials to move, indicating to Barugh that it was working, but to what ends he could only guess.

The overarching shell of an imperial structure had been repurposed, its frame gutted of valuables long ago, covered in plaster and flaking stucco to better suit regional aesthetics. Inside stood a great market, the hollow pointed arches that separated it from without bearing no evidence of their former lives as expansive stained-glass windows that stunk of imperial affluence and narcissism. There, traders and huckster, mongers and merchants, sold the essentials of Lyridia Dhaian



life. Plants that had no counterparts in other lands lay limply from stalls, their odd leaves and tubers on display to the kitchen-slaves shopped for ingredients for the days' meal. Livestock stood braying behind confining cells where they were either auctioned off for breeding or slaughtered for meat, their meagre portions sold for inflated sums.

Imperial demagogues beckoned spectators from street-corners and fanatics of the Abulia walked the streets chanting the word of the sibyl. It was a clash of cultures that had long ago dispensed with rivalries and resolved to just exist, the conjunction perhaps elevating the place above what it may have been had conflict reigned.

The sounds of a commotion drew the group onwards to a throng of people stood in a shapeless mob outside a foodstore, where rations of processed food were distributed to those desperate enough to push through that crowd. Guards hurried those who had had their share along, ignoring the scuffles that erupted throughout the growing crowd. A train of filthy children – perhaps two dozen in all – passed them, large tin saucers filled with raw cloth and other materials balanced on their heads. Their blank faces, their languid bodies said as much about their fate as the chains that united them at the waist. In the opposite direction walked a man pushing a huge clay urn on a cart – a water carrier. Such a precious resource warranted a pair of minders who accompanied him, their steel pectorals glinting above their off-white robes. Others stared at them as they walked swiftly, before disappearing beyond the market. Scattered throughout the place they saw government censors, their technarcane-augmented bodies clearly visible on what could only be described as lecterns affixed to fanning columns, their large augmented eyes observing proceedings stoically.

The place was stifling, with little freedom or chance for hope to survive.

Barugh bought what provisions the group needed and waded through the streets, searching for the western gate.

And so, their sojourn in the dying city was over.

The hills of the Plaleph yawned from the thick blanket of fog that covered their feet, their heads glistening in the morning sun. In the distance, shrouded in a thick haze, stood the violent dyke known locally as Varen's Back, its dark rocks protruding like a spine from the land.

They had stopped for the night on a flat boulder that stood over the plains overlooking that earthen monument. Baruch was writing, his portable desk open before him, scholarly paraphernalia arrayed on its surface. He had taken sketches of the formation before the last of the suns' light had given way to darkness. Now he sat writing of his experiences: his discovery in Amaymon, the Augur's influence that held sway in Soleas, the sprawling decrepitude of Vepar.

He paused, allowing his eyes to linger on Varen's Back, the stark white glow of the Virgin Moon illuminating it. He had given more thought to Slaven, the accusations aimed at him in Soleas, his habits and physical attributes.

Physical attributes, he grinned, as though the man were a mineral or ore to be examined. Memories were returning to him now, slowly, from dank parts of his mind where histories and customs examined years past had been lain to rest. The pale skin, the perfect frame, his size, the lack of appetite.

All the signs pointed towards the Legionnaires of the imperial armies, but if that were the case, what was one of the Steel Legion doing this far from a war? Could he have been one of the clones that were manumitted a few decades ago?

The sudden arrival of Slaven next to him destroyed any chance of further pondering.

The two sat in a palpable silence, one in which Baruch felt a desire from the clone to speak. But something held the giant's tongue.

If his assumption were true, that Slaven was a legionnaire, then that would account for his brooding nature. The legionnaires had not been created to converse or barter. Their role had been one of combat – stoic defence, ruthless offence, and a mind thirsty for orders to obey. Even if he was right and Slaven was such a creature, then truly he was a flake that had fallen far from the girder.

Finally, the giant spoke. His voice was deliberate, his words premeditated. "What know you of Vorropohaiah?"

The words caught Baruch by surprise. For a moment he sat there, pen in hand, paper soaking up ink in a foul black spot as he stared at Slaven. "Of all the things I have thought you might be, an acolyte of the world's deep mythology was not one of them."

Slaven nodded silently, the motion subtle and almost inappropriate for one with so large a frame. "I have been to Vârr before, during the rule of the Seed of Axex. There I travelled with an esoter for some time. I learnt much from him."

"But the line of Axex was deposed some five decades ago. That would make you sixty, at the least. You do not look a day over twenty, nor do you bear the fatigue of the world as others do. Who are you, Slaven?"

"I seek only to warn you of the path you take. Vârr is a haunted place. The echoes of dead gods linger in its valleys and quarries, poisoning the dreams of whoever travel there. I know."

"As do I. This will not be my first time in Vârr, and I doubt it will be my last. There are few extant authorities on the demiurges, yet I think I can afford the hubris of saying that I probably know more about Vorropohaiah than others. Why do you ask about him?"

"Vârr is his tomb. Never is it good to disturb a body's eternal sleep, but the rest of a deity?"

"I daresay we walk over his tomb already. But who can know for sure. That is what I do. I sift through the half-truths and fabricated histories and try to map what really happened. That is why artefacts like this," he said, producing the stone from a compartment on his desk, "are invaluable to us. They give us tangible proof, something around which we can place the foundations of our research."

The scholar handed Slaven the object, who took it hesitantly. He turned it around in his hand, holding it up to the fire. The light caught etched words through the translucent form, highlighting the alien symbols in stark lines that fascinated Slaven. "What does it say?"

Baruch smiled. "Would that I could tell you. The script is ancient, possibly a remnant of the first perfect tongue used by the Two-and-Twenty mortal tribes – which myth tells us was stripped from the mortals: 'never again would the mortals hold the power to work together and defy His will'. Almost certainly it is the script of the tribe of Vorropohaiah," he said, seeing a spreading look of amazement on Slaven's face. "You see before you direct evidence of a Demiurge's actions; words that

he propagated. This truly is his home; as the etymology of many local words show us. Vârr itself is named after him, as are most landmarks in the nation; though few know it.

“I make no presumptions as to the accuracy of my belief, though I think that this is but one shard of a great monstrosity or asterisk dedicated to Vorropohaiah, on which is inscribed a great liturgy, perhaps chronicling his exploits. I have managed to interpret a small part of the text.”

He motioned to a paper on the desk, cleared the surface, revealing clear dark text beneath which was a charcoal rubbing of the stone, the glyphs captured in negative form. Slaven read through the translation, skimming until he came across a reconstruction of the words:

*... / great monuments (buildings?)... eternity stand... / great undertaking... toil... / in which we (our?)... earth which we (our?)... / eternity... / Vorropohaiah... great craft... / we (our?)... eternity... Vorropohaiah... / dreams for eternity... we (our?) / ...*

“Where the stones of our dead lie for eternity,” said Slaven aloud, the final words of the translation echoing in the darkness. “The stones of our dead. Grave markers?”

Baruch shrugged. “Who can tell. What on one hand is revealed by translations is lost on the other to syntax and context we cannot hope to know. Stones of the dead might refer to corpses, grave stones, offerings laid to rest with a body, or something altogether more... unusual.”

Slaven looked to him, questioningly.

Baruch smiled. “You say that the dreams of a dead god haunt Vârr. There are far more aberrant and grotesque things to be whispered of upon this dark windswept knoll. The world itself has lost all semblance of sanity. We have seen it in our travels from Amaymon, and will see far more of it on the road to Vârr. In Kharkharadontis, the Atramenta grows ever closer. Plains of flesh writhe as though alive and sentient. Closer to home, our own wombs produce creatures that can barely be deemed human. In manufactories across the Inner Sea, the line between machine and flesh grows ever blurred; what sanctity once rested in the temple of our bodies lost to the greed of so-called progress. In Khamid the very sea boils, inhibiting the spread of life. The land and all that touches it – flora whose roots dig deep in its barren soil and fauna who thrive on its fruits – grows twisted; a mockery of what it should be. The dreams of a dead god are nothing as to the rot that grapples Elyden; and we are the prize of that outcome. Battered, yet alive.

“Some see me, my vocation, and think what is this man doing? While we struggle to survive, to greet tomorrow with arms that yet live, he wastes his time delving into tombs and old ruins. But they do not understand. This is the Fifth Age of life and just as this age is now ending, so too have the preceding four. Yet I do not think that life ends here. I look to the past in the search of hope, and answers. I must go on, even if you will not. I need to know what happened to these people,” he said, clutching the stone. “I need to know what drove them to extinction, what killed their god, that we may avoid the same fate.”

“Do you really think Vorropohaiah holds the secret?”

“Who can tell, but something must be buried with him. Of that I am sure.”

“That is what worries me,” said Slaven.

Baruch nodded, sat there for a moment. Slowly, he began replacing his tools into the desk, folding it up, ready for the porters to carry the next day. Then, before leaving, he turned round to Slaven and spoke, his eyes glazed, looking at the fire. "Don't think I don't know who you are. But rest easy, I care not for your past."

Slaven sat expressionless, eyes looking up at the open sky where countless stars – the souls of the dead and not-yet born – looked down at him. He wondered if they knew more of things than he did.

## 4

They left the Plaleph hills behind as they continued north, following the course of the river Isodi as they went. The earth was rough and dry, the only vegetation being sporadic tangleleaves, their two immensely large leaves twisted and coiling about each other amid a tangle of tattered fibres. The things seemed impervious to any of the world's decay and lived as long as there was soil, no matter how barren.

They made camp one night at the base of a gigantic specimen, its twin leaves frayed into an unfathomable mesh of fibres at the centre of which was a boulder-shaped fleshy core, the buds of nascent fruit crowning the rim – poisonous, according to the porters.

They proceeded in relative silence, with the two hired guards growing more distant from the group as they moved on. The porters were becoming more skittish the farther from their homeland they travelled. They were becoming wearier, their progress slower.

They passed the remnants of a grey old settlement that instilled in the group renewed thoughts of decay and death. Baruch alone showed the place the remotest of interest, and he spent the hours it took to circumnavigate it trying to fathom its age and history. His ponderings were left unanswered as they left it in their wake and marched onwards to Luto, last of the Lyridia Dhaian settlements before the crossing of the Propontis that awaited them.

The mound of burnt corpses that preceded their entry into Luto should have served as warning of the stresses ahead. Where Vepar had been a cheerless place, an incarnation of the world's corruption, Luto was its charnel-mound. An outbreak of plains-flu had erupted across the coast, killing dozens of pilgrims heading north east to the Pyrean Pyramid.

The stench of death and charred bodies heralded their approach, and it only got worse the closer they moved. Beyond the cremation mounds they saw the low walls of Luto, a long settlement that hugged the shore of the Propontis, exploiting what little strip of fertile water remained of that expansive sea. Beyond, all that was visible were a few greyed minarets and rusted domes; the relic of imperial dominance in the region. From those structures hung long black paraments, motionless in the still air; warning to those approaching of the sickness that lay beyond.

"Plains-flu," said the apprentice as they saw the fullness of their obstacle. His mind, naturally inclined to humour had had enough. He was exhausted and simply looked at the thing, his face filthy, his eyes half closed. He let himself fall to his knees as the weight of the past months travel caught up with him.

"This is the largest settlement on these shores; the only settlement for a hundred miles, either way," said Baruch.

"Ahrishen is looking more tempting now," said Oro.

Baruch shook his head. "No. I grow weary of travel. If we can secure a vessel to take us across the Propontis, we can be in Nouvatai in under two days. Going around Propontis will add months at best."

The apprentice was shaking his head. There was no way he was going to enter that city. He had done much for his master, but there were some things he was not willing to compromise. The journeyman's papers he was working for were important, but they were useless if he contracted

plain flu. Whatever his thoughts though, he would never speak up openly against Baruch, not as long as he called the man master, at least.

“You can do all you want, paper-shuffler,” said Oro. “Keep the rest of my payment if you must, but I am not going any closer.”

“You are not,” said Baruch. Then, turning to Slaven, he continued. “But we are.”

For three days they were locked up in that windowless oubliette, like convicts or untouchables.

There, in the shadow of the city’s large gatehouse they became subjects of beak-masked pharmacopoeists and their acolytes. Stripped naked they were washed with a mixture of vinegar and tree-resin. The process was complicated by Slaven, whose body was covered in technarcane occlusions designed for the intake of shadowstuff. This only confirmed Baruch’s belief in the man’s origins as a clone.

But Luto had been shorn from the empire for centuries and its people were not well-versed in technarcane lore as proven by the confused looks shared between the pharmacopoeists as they saw the inch-wide metal-rimmed holes on the giants’ body. Slaven, with his grasp of the Lyridia Dhaian tongue, had managed to explain the occlusions though the help of a technarcacist who was in quarantine with them.

Disaster averted, they remained in quarantine, where their food was handed to them through resin-caked curtains. The stench of incense, laudanum and Throne-know what else suffused the air of the compound; causing as much distress as the cramped quarters. \* (porters?)

When they were finally granted their freedom to move around the city, they found themselves in a place that was shorn of colour and vibrancy. The streets were patrolled by grotesque figures that hid beneath a thick patchwork of hide, their eyes protected by thick goggles and the distinctive leather beaked masks marking them out as officials. The reek of burning herbs accompanied those figures like cloaks, proclaiming to an ailing populace that they had arrived. Most hovels were marked by the presence of yet more burning resins and bundled herbs, placed there in a bid to ward off the sickness. People shuffled through the streets, either too brave or poor to afford any of the make-shift protection. Those figures became pariahs of their own making, shunned by others who revered the simplistic remedies as something sacrosanct that should not be ignored.

On one street corner they passed an abjurer screaming at a sick man, buboes and red pocks covering what skin was exposed. Acolytes were whipping the body with olive branches, drawing blood and pus that mixed with olive juice. The figure – an elderly being, his skin thick folds of leather – was wailing, as much through ritual as in response to the pain.

They passed the spectacle without comment and continued their trek through the withered streets, the crumbling brick houses looming like tombs about them. With most industries forced to shut down to halt the spread of flu, food had become scarce. What foodstuffs were available outside of rationing were traded at exorbitant prices. In places, the destitute had traded their meagre possessions for scraps of food or inadequate protection, in the hopes that it would stave off the symptoms as they worked. Homeless, they lay on the streets like refuse, discarded by the wealthy, where they harassed those desperate enough to navigate the labyrinthine alleys and streets of Luto. Those wretches were a nuisance, haranguing Baruch and Slaven’s selfishness, harassing their actions, clawing at pouches and clothing. More than once Slaven was made to push them away with force; an

act Baruch realised the clone was reticent of doing. But his size, coupled with the increased threat of retribution forced them to back down.

They were at the docks now, the black waters of Propontis dominating the horizon. Crumbling pillars along the wharf marked the waterline, on which stood abandoned derricks and cranes, their ropes hanging forlorn in the dead air. The place was deserted save for a few fishermen struggling with nets whose catches made their effort seem miserably wasted. A handful of porters fought to get cargo onto carts, the flimsy masks they wore of little consequence to the flu that filled the air.

From those docks the waters of Propontis were visible in all their wretchedness, its dark glass-like surface glistening with traces of oil. Few boats were visible in the area, and of those most were ferries and trade-barges.

And this is the part of the coast that is meant to be most alive, thought Baruch.

They found a fisherman who was willing to take them across Propontis in his vessel; a junk designed for the transportation of freight across still waters, its batten-ribbed sails distinct and sturdy. The man took most of their remaining money in exchange for the passage.

They picked up the others outside the walls further south and went on, emerging from the Sound of Luto into the vastness of the Propontis. The sheer coastline was rough, its pinkish rocks different from the brown plains and sickly grasslands of they had grown used to. Its waters were treacherous – peppered with unseen obstacles that had ripped through the hulls of careless ships – as the driftwood and occasional soulless hulks entrenched along the coast were testament to. Their vessel was shallow-hulled and skimmed over the water without care as they followed the currents north, the cliffs subsiding, revealing a great ruined keep perched on a butte that overlooked the sea. Its near-levelled walls were crumbling, held together by the same vines that strangled it.

They crested the headland, bringing Nouvatai, the capital of Vârr, and its great triumphant arch into view.

The place was a far cry from the settlements of Lyridia and Lyridia Dhai. Vârr had spent millennia under the empire's yoke, and the subjugation showed even after the empire's departure some centuries earlier. The city was spread across the wide shallow coast, behind which rose a great curtain of natural rock. Some houses and structures rose along the escarpment, prefacing the vast palaces, mansions, and administrative and religious buildings that stood above the proletariat dwellings and industrial structures below. Most prominent amongst them, its enveloping evening shadow looming over the structures below, was a monolithic building; the Temple of Nemesis.

It was a Sepulchral edifice, begun in earnest under a distant regime centuries past. Dedicated to Nemesis, patron saint of Nouvatai's then ruler, construction then stalled following a coup and the structure had remained unfinished, its gigantic rusted dome rising in mock-glory, angelic-topped capitals mourning their torpor, the stark lines of its columns tapering into unfinished oblivion. Inside, the temple was lifeless, scaffolds and construction trellises covering its acres-spanning floor and sprawling vaulted pillars. The raw materials that had covered its floor had long-since been pillaged, redistributed throughout the city.

It was a labyrinth of half-finished crypts, catacombs and hidden chapels that had, over the years, become shanties to destitute outsiders. Refugees from the more blighted territories of Vârr had fled to its eastern coast, where misguided hope assured them that resources would be more plentiful. Occasional campaigns were launched by the regent-kings and contracted slave-lords to

keep the derelict population in check, but Novatai had become a haven to such destitutes, and no sooner had a previous group been ejected from the uncompleted temple, than others would start trickling back in. They were a blight, living there in darkness, hiding from the world, stealing from a city that was already rife with crime.

They sailed through the harbours' great marble arch, as small fume-spluttering tugboats moved to ferry them onwards. Officials of the regent-kings motioned for them to make berth, where tax marshals awaited, ready to empty their pockets.

They stood in the docks of that new nation, the junk growing smaller behind them as it began the return journey to Luto, unseen across the sea. Lyridia Dhai seemed a distant place now, something from a transient memory, now passed. In its place drifted the new filth of Novatai.

The memory of the old regime lingered about the place with a palpable thickness, like a mournful ghost. The weight of Korachan was something not easily shifted, and even with the highest echelons of its governance departed, the place was still very much tied down by the shackles of its existence under the shadow of Korachan.

Vârran fusiliers peered down onto the city from steel-capped minarets, their rifles trained lazily on the people below. Cliques of hound like monitors patrolled the streets; their technarcane gear a harsh contrast from the simple trappings of Lyridian sentries. All around, the scent of the Atramenta was stronger. Its faint stench pervaded the air, its presence suffused the very bedrock of the place, corrupting everything.

But Baruch felt something more than the Shadow. He looked north, to unseen mountains that he hoped contained the secrets he was searching for. Distrusted by locals whose myths had populated the place with dark memories and unwanted horrors, the place was shunned as a place of darkness.

Slaven knew that, and had tried to tell him, but Baruch knew better. There was more to it than legend. There always was. Beneath the veneer of fear and insecurity was a truth that, though possibly worse, may yet hold the secret to their survival.

Though a speck of a city when compared with the sprawling behemoths that were Almagest and Teigris, Novatai was cosmopolitan in way that Lyridian cities daren't imagine. Its populace was varied, separated not only by class and vocation but also race. Halfbloods, though few in number, walked side-by-side with humans of mixed ethnicities that echoed the millennia-long dominance of Korachan over the Inner Sea Region during which people had been displaced and conquered and captured and repopulated time and time again. Upon those streets and canals moved traders and merchants whose travels had brought them from Pelasgos, Nárthel, Sarastro and Throne-knew where else. Each brought with them traditions and merchandise that were unknown of in even the largest of Vepari markets.

The skittishness of the Lyridian porters had grown exponentially with their crossing of the Propontis. They were not used to the vagaries of a true city, the differences in culture and actions it brought. Halfbloods were a relatively unknown sight in Lyridia and were considered of unclean stock. To see even a few examples of their disparate kind here, was a shock to them. It was no surprise to Baruch to find the porters missing on their second morning in Novatai, probably having fled back east in the night, unable to take the filth of multiculturalism that assaulted them.



Baruch had no mind to go through the hassle of hiring more again, so seven became four.

They left the city before daybreak after their third night there, the dim reflections of the sun over the Propontis illuminating the road north. Though a path north-west would have been more direct, it would have taken them through three hundred miles of wasteland – the so-called Solum basin, where the bulk of abandoned imperial industries had taken place centuries past – which Baruch had no desire to travel across.

Though the well-travelled north route to the withered forests of Hulka would have the undesirable consequence of bringing them in contact with more refugees and travellers, the group decided that it was the better of two evils – desperate itinerants may be avoided, while the lifeless expanse of Solum meant only death.

Not even halfway through their first day they came across the first signs of life, or at least, what had once been life. A derelict settlement, little more than a collection of crude stone-and-daub refuges and deserted animal pens. Its walls were blackened and a charred mound marked the periphery of the area.

The apprentice looked at the mound and turned his gaze quickly away, making the sign of the sword as he passed.

It was then that Baruch saw the charred bones protruding from the mound and, perhaps more importantly, the gigantic steel sword emerging from the ground behind it.

It was the mark of the Iconoclasts.

Baruch was beginning to paint a picture. A group of people executed and burnt by agents of the Church of the Undying Machine, the mound left as a warning to others who would earn the ire of the Church.

Slaven paused, bent over the mound and inspected it. Amid the blackened husks of livestock he could see the odd signs of human remains. He touched it, felt it sodden. “There is no heat here, no stench. This death is old, the place untouched in years.”

They carried on north, the waste-hills that served as the borders of Solum closing in about them. Flanked by earth and water they had no choice but to move onwards, the threat of other travellers all too apparent. Only there were was no road on which to continue for the path ahead had been blocked by the remnants of a tailings mound that had collapsed. Judging by the weeds and brush that covered it this too had happened a while ago.

“The way is barred,” said Baruch.

“Oh really,” said Oro, eyes already looking around for an alternative route. There were some tracks leading up its surface; likely remnants of days when ambulants and oghur-slaves still hauled waste up the great mound.

Baruch was looking at him. “What say you?”

“Me? I’m just the muscle. I have no thoughts.”

The scholar turned to Slaven, who was still looking around, eyes flitting from the southern route to the mound surrounding them. “We can make try make our way around it. If not, we go back

to Nouvatai and follow the Great Road west to the Ichoria and go north-west from there. We're perhaps twenty miles out of Nouvatai. Noachis is maybe six hundred miles distant. A long detour to get to northern Vârr."

"Yet the alternative seems worse," said Baruch, looking at the mound, imagining the wasteland beyond.

And so it was decided; they climbed the mounds of waste-rock, where the scene of natural carnage was brought into full light – the road north was blocked for miles ahead, the artificial hills that served as Solum's border having collapsed on themselves following a great catastrophe they could only guess at. The only way on was to descend what remained of the western slopes into Solum and continue onwards from there.

Their vantage point afforded them an unrivalled view of the Solum plains, of the wounds and welts that peppered its otherwise featureless terrain. The remnants of roads traced level lines along the plains that converged at the many abandoned open-cast mines that dotted the area. Here and there the discarded shells of ambulants and other titanic vehicles designed to cart soil and earth littered the area, stains of rust trailing away from them like russet shadows. Towers and encampments lay in ruins, some toppled, others hollow and forgotten by an empire that had abandoned the place after raping it of its treasures. Baruch knew the scene was the same all over Vârr. The place had been left a wasteland.

They were two days into Solum now, and a bleakness that had been invisible from the mounds had settled down on them. The place was bleached, its earth saltlike and barren, devoid of life of any kind. The signs of the Atramenta were everywhere; tendrils of darkness that covered large expanses like inimical vines, strangling what little strength remained in the rocks until all that was left was jagged scraps. What shadowstuff had been left in the hulking equipment had slowly trickled out over the years, leaving the vehicles as little more than fossils fused into one cold piece that the Atramenta lay claim to. And between all those details were those monolithic holes, miles wide in some cases, their countless tiers festooned with long tedious switchback roads that converged in the deepest reaches of those pits, most of which were flooded with vibrant waters – rich blues and greens – that bore the taint of ores that were no longer there.

They made camp near one such pit, finding shelter in one of the abandoned ambulants, its expansive cabin and pock-marked roof providing all the shelter they demanded.

In the absence of wood or other fuel, they made do with what they could find and built a fire from old sacks and rotten cloths that littered the place. The fire was pungent and smoky but the nights in such open deserted land were cold, which left them with little other choice.

Slaven, his shadow-born constitution leaving him somewhat inured to the vagaries of temperature, kept watch from the mechanical arm of one of the great machines. Black eyes surveyed the desert for signs of trouble, though he knew that there was nothing to be watchful of. The unearthly silence of the place had kept most of them up the previous night, and exhaustion only was to blame for the deep sleep that had claimed them that night. Above a sliver of the Blood Moon was visible, and the Ivory Moon's ascent of the heavens was yet to begin. *A bad sign*, thought Slaven.

A sound restored him from his reverie, and he looked absently to the horizon waiting to hear it again. It came moments later, identified as little more than the creaking of a nearby piece of machinery.

Satisfied, Slaven allowed himself to relax again, his thoughts already returning to their wanderings. But something drew them back to the present; a movement in the night.

He stood, drawing his fusil, and aimed it at a shape that drew closer, dissolving into three shapes - figures walking towards him.

His grasp of the Vârran tongue meagre, he spoke in Korachani; a language he hoped still bore weight in Vârr. "Raise your hands if you seek only to pass." The words were loud, fuelled as they were by voluminous lungs and a powerful throat.

"Raise your hands," he repeated.

His cohort stirred at the sound, and peered outside the cabin, seeing the figures.

Slaven fired the weapon. The shot echoed tremendously across the quarry, reverberating many times over in the night air. The earth at the approaching figures' feet erupted in dust. "You've had your warning. The next shot will be lethal," he said, releasing the spent casing and aiming the rifle again.

Beneath him, Oro had emerged from the cabin and was busy retrieving his own rifle – a heavy bore beast of Almagest idesign. "Whoever that is either deaf and blind, incredibly confident or just plain gormless. Let's hope it's the former."

Just raise your arms, thought Slaven as his eyes searched the figures, looking for the slightest detail, the slightest reason for him to lower his weapon. But he found none. Any good intentions were hidden beneath thick travelling cloaks that hid flesh and trappings alike.

Then, as he was about to fire again, the central figure raised its arms. But the motion was not one of surrender or compliance, but simply the means through which he removed a thick cowl from its face, revealing the pale weathered skin of a woman whose life had been one spent under open skies and harsh weather. Cloudy eyes glinted in the moonlight.

Oro lowered the now-loaded fusil. "One out of two isn't bad," he said, approaching Slaven. Then, nodding in the newcomers' direction. "What do you think?"

Slaven said nothing and, following a moment of deliberation, raised his weapon again. "Now we can both see each other, why don't you tell me who you are?"

One of the flanking figures, larger than the battered crone, leaned close to her, perhaps whispering something, or listening to words that none but it could hear. Then, suddenly, the central figure spoke, her voice belying the frailty of her form. "The acolytes of Zelophehea seek no enmity in these troubled lands."

"Raising your hands might have let us onto that earlier," said Oro, the 'gun pointed at the trio. His eyes flitted between the silent figures.

"I am but an itinerant, savouring the differing tastes of the Atramenta as it manifests across Elyden."

*An Atramentist*, thought Baruch and Slaven, but the context could not have been more different. Baruch thought only of scholarly boons; what dialogue with an Atramentist might reveal. Perhaps she too was a scholar of the Demiurges. Even if not, it was likely that a shadow-sensitive wanderer might know more about Vorropohaiah, his people, their fate. Slaven, felt a renewed trepidation. The shadow had played a great part in his life, and it had left him scared, weary of those

who manipulated it, used it as a tool. The shadow was more than just a resource. It was a force of creation – and destruction, and it was a fickle element.

“What brings a Set to these dead lands?”

“The absence of life does not mean inactivity. This realm is close to the Atramenta, and its work is clear to see. We seek only to catalogue its myriad forms and manifestations.”

*Fascinating*, thought Baruch. *Another scholar.*

*Fascinating*, thought Oro. *Another paper-shuffler.*

Slaven leaned closer to Baruch, who was still in the cabin with his apprentice. “I do not trust them. We should send them away.”

“There is no reason to fear us,” said the ancient figure, as though in reply to Slaven. “We seek no rest; only passage onwards. We have no worldly goods with which to tempt your hand – the last of those were taken outside Madour. The three of us are blind, our bodies crippled – we are of no use as slaves,” she said, pulling her cloak aside as though revealing an item at auction.

The words seemed old, as though she had spent a lifetime convincing others as to her uselessness. She seemed not to be lying however, as the stiff orthoses framing her legs revealed. The woman would likely buckle without them.

One of her companions helped her replace the cloak as Baruch nodded. “We mean you no harm. I am a scholar myself, cataloguing the myths and histories of aeons past. Stay the night with us, let us share tales of these lands and banish the fitful rest that haunts this place.”

The woman nodded slowly. “The warmth of a fire will do my aching bones good.”

Slaven shook his head, the motion almost imperceptible in the night. *They hire guards and then invite strangers to our camp. Might as well put a knife to our own necks.* “I will search for fuel,” he said suddenly, the words barely audible as he turned away from the camp.

Oro, the apprentice and the two minders were sitting in the back of the ruined ambulant, the odd angle of its final resting place providing little comfort to their ailing bodies. Oro counted around thirty days since his departure from Amaymon, most of which had been spent on the road. The last few days had been harsh, sleep coming intermittently, with difficulty. His were a hardy people, their bodies tough, their short legs rendered in sinuous muscle that make prolonged movement easy – indeed the Tikbala were a nomadic race by nature, their ancestors travelling Elyden in great herds.

The apprentice was not built that way. Humans had spindly bodies, their thin legs designed for short intermittent distances. They were an agrarian people, meant to stay in one place, but something in their thoughts or dreams thought the contrary. How else could they have spread across the world like that, when the rest of the Two-and-Twenty races had faltered into near extinction?

He was nodding, he didn’t know why. He turned to the minders, their concealed bodies; the dirty bandages wrapped tightly about their arms, the rawhide mantles that covered their bodies and faces in a high collar. “You from around here?”

Silence.

Baruch looked into murky eyes, wondered if they had always been ruined in that way, of if it had been a gradual thing, slowly marring the world around her until there nothing was left to see. Regardless, the woman was old, and it was impossible to deny that the sun and elements had been her closest friends throughout her life. As she spoke about the various aspects of the Atramenta – its inexplicable dichotomy with the physical, how it weakened the somatic aspects of the world even as it granted them a strength unknown to aspects untainted – he looked at her, wondering what else she knew.

“There are at least three different strains of umbra visible in these lands,” she continued. “The most pervasive and dominant being the racha umbra, ‘the strangler’. It occurs in places where the Penumbra is only somewhat close, yet the weakness of the natural world in that specific area serves to invite its presence there, where it appears as tendrils of feathery blackness – like veins in marble – that grapple anything that remains immobile long enough. We too, should we stay here long enough, will eventually be stricken by its touch; our strength slowly sapped.”

Baruch let her speak, her words a balm to his yearning for knowledge and it was only when she paused for some time that he spoke his mind. “I come here seeking remnants of the Ropohaii, the children of Vorropohaiah. I know he was not as prolific or proficient as Rachanael with the Atramenta, but perhaps you have come across something that relates to him or the ancient world in Vârr?”

“Vorropohaiah,” she said, the word uttered slowly, with great deliberation, as though every syllable were of a very specific form. “The name was once whispered in these lands, but he is now forgotten to all but the most... probing or unfortunate amongst us. This place bears the scars of his presence. Ancient ruins, their scope and magnitude too great to be attributed to primitive mortals are given the honour of being his creations. And why not, for what mortal could construct the subterranean waterways of the Bathanat, the unseen abyss of Cecropia. The Prison Carceri. Myriad unnamed colossi built from a singular block of ore or metal that is not found elsewhere, as though he gathered every instance Elyden had to offer and combined it through his secrets to erect a singular edifice, a monument to things forgotten and remembered only in fitful dreams. Who knows what other byzantine wonders were created on a whim by that despairing deity? Who knows.”

“Can anything here, in Solum, be accredited to him?”

“The Hutha Va, due west, lies half sunken, its features worn my uncounted millennia of weathering and more recently black rains. Its stepped base was once uncovered by a mile-deep quarry, but it collapsed and lies now buried.”

Baruch produced the stone from his bag (he had left his portable desk behind in Nouvatai after the porters’ desertion) and showed it to the woman. “Do you recognise this? It was found in Lyridia, but likely originated in a site north of here, where others of its kind have been found.”

The woman took the thing and examined it in her hand, turning it around, feeling its surface, listening as Baruch described it. “These marks, what are they?”

“A primitive cuneiform script,” then, producing the paper, he read what he had translated.

Just as he was about to finish, reading the final line, the woman dropped the stone, her hands paralysed, eyes wide. “Where the stones of our dead lie... this is old?”

“Ancient. A relic of the time of the Two-and-Twenty tribes, likely after the Sundering of Tongues.”

The woman was nodding, her hands now groping around the cabin for the stone. She found it and handed it back to Baruch. "Forgive me, but those words... they remind me of a tale from my childhood, something I had forgotten until now. You mention the tale of the Sundering of Tongues. There are many other parables and tales dating from such ancient days. The Wars in Heaven. The soulstones.

"The first mortal peoples of Elyden were sown, like seeds, by the Grand Architect, and emerged fully formed from sodden earth millennia before their time, drawn by the ceaseless artifice of the worker gods. They were mishappen, born prematurely. Imperfect, their nascent senses assaulted by the chaos of that new world. The mortal bodies withered in response to this. Over the years this chaos would manifest as a withering of the mortal body, the decay of thought and, ultimately, death.

"As an oyster gathers the dirt around it and stores it as a pearl, so too did these mortals filter the chaos of their world in a bid to quell the ceaseless attack on their senses, storing it as a pearl-like growth of chaos that would continue to grow even after death, outgrowing desiccated flesh, causing preserved skin to rupture and tear until nothing was left but an iridescent globe bursting from ancient bones. Soulstones, some call them."

"Spirits."

The woman nodded. "So some say. Following this, the Grand Architect, seeing the suffering of the mortals, separated the mortal aspect from the immortal; causing a sundering of spirit and vessel upon death. No longer would the spirit be constrained by physical laws, incarcerated in the body – it would be allowed to escape where it awaits the creation of the perfect world, into which it will later descend."

"And the stones of those already perished?"

"They remain in the world, fossils of an ancient time, buried deep in bedrock."

"And the people of Vorropohaiah revered their own soulstones."

"They had to, for their lord would not. The worker gods were cast down for their mistakes. Vorropohaiah grew increasingly despaired at his loss of divinity and the gift of spirit the mortals were given. And over time he abandoned them."

Baruch nodded. He'd come across enough fragments and versions of the story before. He looked at the stone he had found, looked at the inscriptions, wondering if he was holding a soul in his hands. Though the lure of such a prospect was enticing, he doubted it. There were many factors to consider, not least of which was the veracity of the tale. It was difficult to distinguish fact from myth and it was his job to sift through the fantastical and find the truth of matters. But still, to even consider the hardship endured by those early mortals, the unimaginable deluge of perception that their nascent senses must have bombarded them with. To be in a timeless void and then be spat out into the chaos of life... it must have been maddening. And then the slow anguished eternity of stagnation, incarcerated on the material plane for a crime that was not your own. It frightened him to even consider it.

Then, suddenly, the woman spoke. "Only death awaits those who seek Vorropohaiah. Though he stagnates, it is said that his hunger is insatiable, that the entirety of Vârr is his feeding ground, the dreams of those who linger here his favoured morsels.

“No. I must do this. My life has been nothing but a series of discoveries made in this cause. I have seen the decline of this world, the rot that besets it, and I cannot ignore it.”

“And you look to the Despairing One for answers? You are misguided, Son of Avraham. You will find only suffering in the pits of Carceri.”

“Carceri?” He knew of the place, had consigned its myth to memory years ago. “There are things even I know are folly. To believe that such an expansive abyss was hollowed out beneath Vârr, the eons of misguided back-breaking labour it must have taken those millions of fanatics... it is too much to accept as real. I know the legends of the Varrachon, but it just cannot be.”

“You want it to be. Only the veneer of the scholar prevents you from accepting it.”

“No,” said Baruch, shaking his head. “Carceri is myth; the ancients’ way to anthropomorphise the journey of the afterlife, and the creation of the Varrachon a means to explain the sufferings of life. No more.”

“I have seen its wonders.”

Slaven walked. He knew not where his legs took him, but he knew it was not the search for fuel that drew him on.

He had heard of the order of Zelophehea before. He couldn’t remember when exactly, but the connotations were far from noble. Zelophehea had been an acolyte of the shadow many years ago, a polymath whose expertise lay in fields as varied as Penumbra, technarcana, empyrealogy, theosophy and eschatology. Her time was devoted to the shadow, its effect on the world, its many manifestations and the benefits and problems of its application and misuse. Her slaves were subjected to the worst of its effects, the changes they underwent catalogued meticulously, their afflictions examined as a biologist might scrutinise an insect under a lens. The secrets of the flesh were made manifest in such ways, manipulated through its use into grotesqueries that might serve some purpose, horrific as it might be. Through such immoral probings were the first fumbling steps on the path to Atramental body modification made possible; a labour of which Slaven knew he was the fruit.

He found himself walking one of many paths that led down the side of a deep quarry pit, the turquoise waters at its base unchallenged by the night sky above. The labyrinth of paths and roads crossed each other in disorienting switchbacks that were once used by ambulants and crawlers lifting raw rock away for processing. Whatever riches this place had once yielded were long-since spent, their only memory the scars of their extraction.

Slaven walked ever downwards, his feet compelled, drawn on by some unseen force he could not identify. Memories of his formative years – torturous experiences that lesser beings would not have survived – were regurgitated by the arrival of that occultist, her mention of Zelophehea. Rites of indoctrination, their reams of litanies and supplications to the Machine and the Shadow, returned to him, words whose memory had been obliterated decades ago suddenly resurfacing, bringing him a step closer to a past that he wanted to remain buried.

Visions of engorgement sessions returned to him in flashes like scenes from a ritual mutilation. He was suspended from chains on a cross-shaped gurney. Blood and umbra dripped onto filthy floors. Mishappen haemonculi – his lesser cousins of the vat – attaching leather coils to his occlusions. Wretched hands screwing the things painfully into place. The torrent of umbra gushing

into his body, its frigid serpentine coils granting life to a body that would wither without its presence. Then darkness. The catatonia of reclusion that followed his marriage with the umbra. The same substance that was death and decay to other creatures was his very own lifeblood.

But, then again, he was like no other natural creature, for there was nothing natural about him. What other creature of the natural world could claim a birth outside of a womb? Whose gestation was something of dank oubliettes and workshops, experimentations, grafts, infusions, umbral-supplementations and vigilance? None. For what creature of the natural world was crafted – *incepted* – through mortal endeavour, whose womb was a cold steel vat, whose parents were corpses from which were looted organs, germs, and essential salts, like scraps from a salvaged wreck?

He was a shell of a being, neither mortal nor immortal – a pariah. For what honest man, scion of natural reproduction, could look upon him, a soulless abomination, and not be appalled?

He felt his body slumping down into damp dirt, his strength and will waning. A wretched heap, he allowed the past, the dark memories, the guilt, to rush back and engulf him. There was a small part of him that saw this descent into pity and balked, unaffected as it was by the insidiousness of Vârr. The rest of him wallowed, paralysed by the flood of raw recollections

Baruch was staring at the woman, the murky veneer of her eyes, the harsh lines of her face. Though blind he could sense her eyes staring right at him, boring into his head. He could sense the conviction in her words, the memories that fuelled them, but he could not believe that what she was saying was true. He could not, for it was, it meant...

“I have seen its horrors yet I have returned, strengthened perhaps by the despair and malfeasance that lurk in unopposed in its hollows. I have seen things to make the most stoic of detractors question the nature of this world.”

Baruch was shaking his head. “No. There are boundaries between myth and history. There are laws that govern the shape and nature of this world – the laws of the Firmament and the Atramenta, from which all was created.”

“Laws that govern nature? The same laws that oversee the unravelling of our world? You are a learned man. Perhaps you should withdraw your attentions from ancient books and look to the present. Elyden is dying, and in the decay of earth and air and sea, things that should not be have come to pass.”

He knew this, had admonished Slaven over the same naiveté of which he was now being accused, but still, he could not accept it. There were some things that were just too inimical for the mortal mind to accept. Carceri was such a place. “No,” he muttered, the capacity for further words dammed by conflicting thoughts.

“I have seen the pits of Bel Shallath, the spawning grounds of vorrohaghor, the endless forests of hanging chains that the ropohaii call the Gath Vallii. I have been to its decrepit capital; Pandæmonia, which rests on the shoulders of the fallen worker god himself. Vorropohaiah.”

“Think it is time you and your companions left,” said Baruch standing. His head was shaking vehemently, as though of its own accord. His hands were fidgeting, looking around pockets and bandoleers for things that weren’t there. He was looking around nervously, perhaps expecting to see a manifestation of the demiurge to descend upon them. “Yes, I think that would be for the best.”



Suddenly, he was on the floor of the cabin again, a great weight having pulled him down. Beside him, the eyes of the itinerant woman had become gaping maws of darkness, a nimbus of shade emanating from them, rendering her in an altogether more sinister light. Her skeletal hand was on his ankle, the two disparate appendages as though frozen together. He felt weak, tired, the fatigue of his travels suddenly caught up with him, no longer held at bay by his enthusiasm. His shoulders slumped, his arms numb, tingling. He could not lift them. What had at first been incredulity was quickly changed into fear. He was helpless against what was clearly a Set of the Atramenta.

Then the hand was gone, and immediately he felt warmth and strength slowly return to him. He struggled to move, but his body was still numb, and he managed only to fall sideways. He saw the hand reach towards him and grab his head, jagged nails biting hard into skin as fingers probed its surface. Their cold touch bored into his thoughts, like a lance through soft flesh. He screamed, the sound primal and without thought. He saw memories that were not his, travels through sunless lands he had never seen, skies that were without moons or stars hanging unseen overhead. And a yellow eye, timeless and wretched watching him beneath rotting lids.

Then he was back in the present, on the ground outside the ambulant. The Tikbala was beside him, though he rapidly disappeared into the cabin, where he heard the sounds of a commotion, as though coming from a far-off place. He rolled onto his side and managed to get up, the land about him blurred. His intent to climb up to the cabin was halted by the hands of one of the woman's' minders who had appeared suddenly beside him.

The sounds from the cabin died down like a storm abating, and they stood in a silence that was broken by the thud of a body striking the ground – Oro. The body landed in an awkward angle and remained motionless.

The Atramentist climbed slowly down from the ambulant, her creaking body barely able to complete the journey. Back on the ground, she turned and gazed at Baruch, the amaurosis in her eyes returned. "The world needs to remember, Baruch."

Slaven woke, his head aching as though a great weight had been lifted from it. He was under open skies where stars shined brightly and the red haze of the Blood Moon was apparent yet beyond sight.

He stood, remembered slowly where he was. He went to return to the camp where the others were resting, when something caught his eye. He stopped and looked at it, the starlight above illuminating the walls of the pit in a stark light that rendered its every detail, making the shape instantly recognisable.

A perfect hemispherical indentation in the wall, as though a sphere embedded there had been exposed with the hollowing of that great pit. The circle was perhaps two feet wide and perfectly smooth, as revealed to his touch.

Immediately upon touching it he was stricken with a great sorrow, as though something terrible had happened there, the memory of which lingered in the air. He touched the concave surface again, fingers tracing unseen lines on the surface; each touch eliciting a joyless pang that hung about him like dusty webs that could not be fully removed.

He looked around, half-expecting to find what sphere had been contained in that hollow lying somewhere at his feet.

Compelled to find the object responsible for the indentation, he began grasping at the sides of the pit, pulling on whatever loose stones he could. The mark of the shadow was plain to see on the walls, and veins of desiccating blackness peppered the area like clumps of foul roots that strangled the goodness out of the land. The bleached stones crumbled at his touch, making the going easy, yet ultimately fruitless. Frustrated by the barrenness of the pit, his search became more frantic and he pulled on every stone and scrap on that wall, causing the thing to disintegrate. A great heap crumbled down like dry clay around him. He sidestepped the small rockslide and continued groping at the wall, digging more and more, the true reason as to his agitated search not once making itself apparent.

And then, its iridescent surface glinting under the starlight, he saw it – a small part protruding from the hollow exposed by the collapse. He stepped over the loose rubble and began breaking the flanking stone apart, revealing more of the thing. When he had pulled away enough earth, it just fell to his feet in a dull thud that betrayed its weight.

Slaven fell to his knees and lifting his hands towards it. But he stopped short of touching it and just observed it. It was akin to a gigantic pearl, perhaps two feet wide, its surface a flood of myriad colours shimmering as though with a life of their own under the stars. He looked closer, trying hard to ignore what looked like clouds moving, undulating, beneath the surface. Then, unable to contain himself any longer, he touched it.

It was warm. A thing of more comfort he could not remember. It made him think of the warmth and tenderness he had always imagined an unborn child felt in the womb. It was a love he would never know. And now, finally, in this abandoned place forsaken by deities and mortals alike, he knew what it felt like. He rubbed his hands over it, feeling the silky warmth, and for the first time in what might have been centuries, he felt a tear trickling down his cheek. Another followed it, and then another and before he knew it, he was sobbing uncontrollably. In that torrent he finally felt what it was like to be mortal; to have a spirit.

He lay there for a while, cradling the thing in his arms like a child in dire need of love. He had no clue what the thing was, who it had once been, how long it had been there, trapped beneath the surface like a fossil. But he knew enough to know that it was a thing of sadness, something betrayed and cast out for a fault that was not its own.

But he had lingered long enough. It was time to return to the others. He looked long at the sphere before leaving, wondering to leave it there or entomb it once more. Something told him that it had been in darkness for long enough, and that the company of stars and moons would do it good.

He left it there with a prayer of safety.

The second minder appeared from behind the ambulant, holding on to the apprentice, who was struggling. He went still when he saw Oro's body and Baruch held as he was.

"I too have seen, and only now do I realise that some things are best left buried," he said, pointing to his head. The flash of images and stolen memories that had flooded his thoughts had already gone, leaving him with little more than dim recollections and fragmented echoes. But they were enough to warn him away from what had, until then, been his life's pursuit.

The Atramentist smiled, rotten teeth stark in the darkness. "Now you may say that, but soon the seeds I have sown will take root and you will begin to wonder. It will grow into a compulsion

greater than any you have ever felt. Now you know the truth of it all can you really let its mysteries pass unknown? I have been searching for one such as yourself for an age. Inquiring minds are not easily found in the ruin of your usurper empire; far too many of its wretches have been subjugated into submission. A healthy mind is priceless, and here it is, the perfect vessel for the sum knowledge of the ropohaii and their father. If only you have the strength to find them.”

“What good will it do us, knowing the madness of an imprisoned Demiurge? His secrets can only ease our downfall.”

“The Atramenta conquers all. Better to prostrate yourself and fall quickly, painlessly; than to struggle on oblivious to slow rot. Carceri can grant you such an end. Lose yourself in struggles of the mind and inure yourself to the chaos of this world’s downfall.”

“Do you intend on killing us too?”

The woman laughed. “Your death is assured. I have no purpose in expediting it. Better the world that created you claim you than I.”

“As happened with Oro?”

“It is only natural imperative that a cornered creature defend itself.”

Baruch had had no particular affection for the creature, but that was no reason for him to condone its death. “It is not right,” was all he managed to say.

“Tell me one thing that is? Vorropohaiah realised it long ago; nothing in this world is fair. People are punished for their good deeds while the wretched and insidious prosper as kings. What is right about that? If only you accept and embrace the chaos of this world, then will you find contentedness,” she said, laughing.

“Let us go.”

The woman stopped laughing and nodded to her minders to release them. Baruch and the apprentice gravitated to each other, and inspected Oro’s body. It was lifeless.

“Now leave.”

“You may cast us out, but the seed has been sown. You will seek answers.”

“Leave.”

“As you wish. Come, my sons. May the night lead us on.”

Slaven returned to a place of silence, to the inert body of his companion and the lingering miasma of that wretched woman and her minders.

He mourned Oro’s passing. He knew little of the tikbalas ways save the occasional useless anecdotes Oro would sometimes feed him; most of which were probably untrue or twisted into some joke. He knew nothing of their burial customs or their true faith, if even they had one. He knew not what Oro would have wanted. All the man seemed to care about was money and drink. Slaven had neither of those things to leave as offerings.

“What should we do with him?” said Baruch.

“Anywhere but here. Anywhere but Vârr.”

Baruch nodded. “We will help you.”

Slaven went to answer, but paused. He was so used to a solitary existence that he was not used to accepting aid from others, even after the months he had spent with Oro. After the nights’ events it would be good to be with others, even if for a short while. “Yes,” he said, finally.

## 5

They used a sheet of pitted steel as a sled, and Slaven hauled Oro's body back to Nouvatai, where he sought to have the body preserved for a journey east into the Cartiga mountains, of which Oro had spoken fondly.

Yet none of the morticians or embalmers they approached encountered would sully their trade by working on the corpse of such a mortal. No amount of coercion would alter their stance on the matter, and they were eventually forced to bury the body in a pauper's yard outside the city, where thousands of unmarked graves marked the final burial of the poor and destitute. Slaven hated to leave Oro in such a place, but had no option – the body would simply not survive a trek into Lyridia. Besides, no ship would carry a rotting corpse across Propontis. With a silent prayer to an unanswering deity, Slaven left the body with its wretched new custodians.

In the following days neither party truly spoke of their experiences there. Baruch never learnt of Slaven's discovery in the mine and Slaven never heard of the woman's cryptic warnings – Baruch had omitted them from his recounting of the events that had led to Oro's death.

Slaven met with the scholar and the boy in a resthouse where they had been staying. The three ate in an uncomfortable quiet. Slaven, expecting Baruch to announce his imminent departure from the city back into the field, waited silently, the prospect of more days on the road a future he cared little for.

But the words never came. Indeed, he noticed that Baruch was reticent the whole time, his eyes often falling on distant objects and staring absently at them, and not once on Slaven himself. The apprentice, too, seemed ill at ease, though his consternation seemed to stem from a discomfort aimed at his master. Had Slaven missed something in his busy search of the city? He saw no need to breach the subject, reasoning that if Baruch failed to mention anything his services were still needed. He had, after all, taken them to Vârr safely. *Safely*, he thought with a weak shrug. It was hardly the word to use, but the paper-shuffler and his boy had emerged unscathed and that had been the objective, had it not?

Their meagre food finished, the need to fill the void left in its wake with words feeling all the more palpable, Baruch spoke. "Your commission is at an end. I fear that my money will not fill the gap left by your friends' needless death, but it is the least I can give you after the hardships we have endured. May it bring you more luck than my company."

Slaven allowed the man to deposit the pouch of bits on the table. He trusted the man, would inspect its contents later. "Where will your travels take you next?" he asked, finishing what would likely be his last drink in Nouvatai before leaving.

"My apprentice and I are to remain here for some days, finalising preparations for our next expedition," said Baruch. "There is much that needs my attention in Vârr."

"You plan to continue north?"

The man hesitated then nodded, the motion curt, not altogether believable. "I have come across some information. There is much beneath Vârr that requires my attention."

"Beneath Vârr?"

Baruch nodded, his eyes wide, trembling. "Yes. Vorropohaiah calls to me. The stone that brought us here is but nothing to the secrets that lie buried in Pandæmonia."

The apprentice stood and motioned for Slaven to leave. "Please, leave. We are done here," he said, his eyes belying the words. The boy was terrified, Slaven could tell. He was about to talk, to ask what had happened to them in Solum, but the boy spoke again. "Please, Slaven. Leave us be, you do not want to join us."

Slaven stood, his head nodding slowly. Whatever it was that made the scholar continue in his journey was something far greater than Slaven, and he had no place in it. He nodded faintly, took the pouch and went to leave.

"Tell me Slaven," said Baruch. "Would you follow me if I asked you to?"

Slaven paused and replied, his face turned away from the table. "I would stop this foolish venture."

Baruch smiled. "Then it is a good thing I have dismissed you."

Slaven went to leave, but something stayed him. "Only death awaits you there."

"Death awaits us at every turn, if not today, then tomorrow. It is how we choose to embrace it that matters."