



# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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## HEARTLESS

by Peadar Ó Guilín

“No one asks for death.” This was the proud boast of the city of Kalegwyn. “No one asks for it.” Until Malern did. A bad move for her, as it turned out. She awoke on Castellan Garvinger’s operating table with his favorite surgeon elbow-deep in her chest.

“This is going to hurt,” said Garvinger from somewhere in the background. “Scream all you want.” And she did. She couldn’t help herself, although she knew her cries were being conveyed magically to the plaza beyond. She screamed until something seemed to snap in her throat, and after that the best she could manage was a wheezing, bubbling sound that carried no hint of her former insolence.

The surgeon kept working, ripping and tearing. He made sure she could see everything. They had pointed a mirror at her chest and had pinned her eyes open.

Swinging from the roof hung a little cage with Garvinger’s window-witch inside. It babbled spells to keep Malern alive and conscious throughout the whole operation. Malern

couldn't see its mad, warty little face, but now and again, cool drops of its sweat fell onto her fevered skin.

“Remember,” Garvinger told her, “you don't have to die. You can be a witch instead; your heart is not yet withered.”

If anyone else had asked, she would have caved at once, given them what they wanted to end the agony. “No....” Where did she find the strength? But she had always been the rebel, hadn't she? Torturing her father with her lack of respect? “No....” And Garvinger nodded his perfect face, and already she wanted to call him back.

The surgeon completed his work by sewing her smashed torso back together and giving the window-witch further instructions. The creature had once been a young woman, one of Garvinger's own great-grandchildren. It gibbered in its cage and banged its mad little face against the bars—*smack, smack, smack*. Its nose crunched and blood flowed over a warty chin to splash onto the floor. It didn't stop hurting itself until Garvinger cursed at it and sent it cringing with a clatter of the bars. Eventually, the window-witch muttered some nonsense that eased Malern's pain and returned strength to her limbs. Garvinger's surgeon smiled. “Consider yourself executed, dear.”

Malern sat up. Enough of her own blood stained her torso that she should have been dead five times over. A tube

protruded from under her left breast and curled away out of sight.

“I’m... I’m still alive.”

“Alive! Oh yes! Garvinger was most specific, were you not, sir?” The castellan nodded. “Alive, but executed. That’s what you are, dear. My triumph, my absolute triumph!”

Garvinger shook glossy hair from his young face so that it rippled in the light of the witch’s window. He had never bothered to rejuvenate his voice. Each syllable emerged as though scraping over a rock. “You will be our example. Nobody who sees you will ever ask for death.” The town needed witches, and he would do what he had to. He held a small leather bag in his left hand and squeezed it every few seconds, causing Malern’s tube to jerk. “Greet your new heart, citizen,” he said.

He gave the bag to Malern and pressed her unresisting fingers around it. “Don’t fall asleep, girl. If you forget to squeeze for more than a minute, you will be... at rest. Just as you asked.” He smirked. Malern wanted to pound the smugness out of him, but all she could do was sit up. She felt dizzy and sick until Garvinger’s fingers squeezed hers again, causing the blood to surge around her body.

“I asked for death,” she said.

“You hold it in your hands,” replied Garvinger. “You are free to stop squeezing at any time. I have had my fill of you and your prophesies of doom.”

\* \* \*

In a way, Malern had started digging her own grave a week earlier. Her father was out of the house again, campaigning to unseat Garvinger as castellan and head of the council. Her younger brother, Rodrig, the house witch, had been left at home to gibber quietly in his cage in the special window above the front door. It was a bad sign for a man of Father’s station to leave the source of his power behind him, but he had little choice. Rodrig’s skin had turned green by now. His eyes had shrunk to glowing red pin-pricks. Sanity had long since departed, and his spells were growing ever more unpredictable.

“We’ll both be dead within the year,” Malern told her younger sister. “Or in the witch’s cage.”

Alysa pretended not to hear. Her curly hair floated above her head, threaded with impossible jewels, while a tiny harp played music from the Old Empire. The instrument would increase in volume when necessary to drown out the cries of their brother from his swaying prison at the window.

Malern slapped the harp onto the floor and grabbed her sister by the ear. “Did you hear what I said? Rodrig won’t last the month. What do you think will happen then?”

“Let go, you dirty vagabond! Why must you always strike?”

“Rodrig will need replacing, you fool, and who’s the next youngest?”

Alysa could be stubborn too and kept her mouth shut until Malern wrung a yelp out of her with a twist of her fingers.

“You’re afraid, Alysa. Well, so am I. I’m sick with it. Things are getting worse. We’re near the end now, that’s what I think. And not just our family.”

“Let me go!”

Instead, Malern pulled her out onto the balcony overlooking the plaza that had once been the courtyard of the Last Emperor when all of Kalegwyn had been an enormous palace and the desert beyond, its capital city.

A hundred people filled the square below or swooped, laughing, through the air on cushions. Others rode about the edges on the backs of unicorns. The crowd had caught themselves a vagabond and families fought to get at the poor man and claim him for themselves.

Malern knew most of them down there in the scrum. Red-faced Ortular kept screaming, “He owes me a debt! I have papers!” She saw him punch an older woman in the kidneys to get closer while his remaining son, face bloodied, had dared to bring a stick into the fray. Desperate times indeed! But at least nobody was stupid enough to use magic.

On other balconies around the plaza, or perching on beanstalks they'd just grown, the city's saner children yelled, "Witch! Witch! Witch!" While caged prisoners gibbered in madness behind the windows at the front of every house.

The people always needed more witches.

The vagabond was weeping and begging. "He should ask for death," Malern said. "It's the law."

"Nobody asks," Alysa said. "Will you release my ear?"

"It's getting worse, 'Lys. Am I the only one who can see it?"

Alysa shrugged uncomfortably, her jeweled hair swaying above her like a cloud. She said not a word, but Malern knew she was thinking that Father would never put Alysa in the cage, not while he still had another daughter. A daughter famed in the town for defiance and complaint. No, Father would never cage Alysa.

"You're right," said Malern, feeling sick. She released her hold.

"I didn't say anything."

Down below, Garvinger's militia was beating its way through the crowd with sticks. The vagabond was to be auctioned off for votes. Assuming he failed to ask for death, the winner would bathe him in the old Emperor's sacred spring and hang him in a cage in front of their house.

As her sister went back to her harp, Malern whispered, “They’ll never cage me.”

But Rodrig’s spells continued to grow ever more unpredictable. The last straw came only a few days later. Their poor father needed a spectacular entrance to the council chamber as part of his campaign. He got what he had asked for, finding himself trussed up and naked on the table in front of his peers with an apple in his mouth.

The rumors of his humiliation reached home before he did —laughter in the streets, bawdy jokes shouted up to where Malern waited on the balcony. Her heart turned cold, and again, she found herself pleading with Alysa for help.

“What do you want me to say, Malern? Father will do what’s best for the household.”

“What if it’s you he picks, ‘Lys? To bathe in the Emperor’s Spring? What’ll you say then?” “Why is it only now you complain, big sister? We had three other brothers before Rodrig, did we not? We had feasts every night when porridge would have sufficed. We had ghosts to tell us stories and mirrors to show us the stupid people of faraway lands. Three brothers!”

Nor had it just been family members who became witches. For years the citizens of Kalgwyn had kidnapped foreigners who wandered into the desert in search of the Emperor’s fabled



treasure. But it had been years since anyone had seen a stranger, let alone caught one.

“This is the last time I’m going to ask you, ‘Lys. Please help me talk to father. Please.”

She had turned away. Malern’s heart ached to see it, because Alysa was the one thing in the world she loved. Even a few months before, they had been close, tumbling through the air on wings conjured up by the family’s witch. They had shared secrets over this boy or that and had allied against their stronger brothers until, one by one, father had chosen them for the cage. Now, Alysa was his favorite and that was that. Malern saw a tear trickle down Lys’s cheek and even heard a stifled sob as she closed the door behind her. *Oh, Emperor! She’s already mourning me.*

Malern leaned panting against the wall, although she hadn’t run so much as a step. Father was coming home. Naked, angry. In need of great power. Father was coming to replace Rodrig in the cage.

She took a golden candlestick and waited for him behind the door. She brought it down on his skull when he walked in. Her brother, suspended at the special witch window just above the entrance, cackled and spat down upon the scene of patricide in the hallway.

Afterwards, Malern wept over the corpse. Then, she raised her eyes. “Rodrig?” she whispered. “Rodrig? I swear I will use you no further after this night. I swear it. But I am the new head of the house-hold. I need.... I need you to make this look like a suicide. Fix his head and hang him by the neck.” Nobody would be surprised if he killed himself after his humiliation today at the council. “Can you do that, Rodrig? This one last thing?”

\* \* \*

True to her word, Malern scandalized the town by refusing to use magic for her father’s funeral.

“That’s disgusting,” one ancient man told her as she helped Alysa drag their father out into the desert.

“You’re the disgusting one, up there on a bloody elephant! How many years of your witch’s life did that cost? And for what?”

“The castellan has heard of your impertinence, young lady.”

“It’s none of his business.”

When the sisters came home, exhausted and filthy, Rodrig was quiet. “He’s actually sleeping,” said Malern. The cage swung in the breeze. It had to be visible to passers-by—a house had a witch or its inhabitants were vagabonds and property of

the town. As Malern was the eldest, Rodrig belonged to her now and would obey no other without previous instructions.

She rested her fingers against the bottom of the cage. “Maybe if we leave him alone, he’ll return to his old self.”

“You’re mad, sister!” said Alysa. She slid down the wall onto her bottom, crying and shaking. “Just do it,” she said. “You’re head of the household. Take me to the Spring.”

“I wouldn’t, Alysa! I love you.”

“You have no choice. Who will magic our rocks into food?”

Malern crouched down beside her. Her arms ached from dragging their father into the desert, from lifting stones with her own strength to cover him. “I have a plan, sister...” And she did. Once, on her birthday, their father had gifted her with the ability to read. She owned an entire library of children’s books, and one of these had explained how to grow food. It didn’t sound that difficult. There was a ritual that involved putting seeds into the ground. You watered them; added fertilizer, and shortly afterwards the desert would offer up a feast!

Everybody laughed at the girls struggling in the garden amongst toppled, inedible statues of purest gold. Fat Herko rained on them from a magic cloud. “For your plants!” he kept shouting. “You’ll need all you can get!”

Even more humiliating were his repeated attempts the following day to “fertilize” the garden with the help of an incontinent pegasus. The creature’s aim wasn’t very good, but half the town turned out to laugh all the same. Malern’s aim was no better with the pebbles she flung back, and Alysa tried her patience further when she refused to work in the garden any more.

Malern found her sister hunched over and weeping in the corner of her now-filthy room. The singing harp no longer worked. The golden curls hung lank around her shoulders.

“They’ll stop laughing,” Malern said, “when they grow bored. Until then we need to—”

Alysa’s fist came out of nowhere and sent Malern reeling backwards. “Why don’t you just do it already? If I’m going to be in the cage anyway, why do I need to suffer like this first?”

“I don’t—”

“I’m dying!” shouted Alysa. “I’m... I’m *bleeding*.”

“You are?” Malern picked herself up. “I don’t see anything.”

“From... from between my legs. Do you understand? For....” She sobbed. “For three days now. It just.... I’ve had to use rags.... I....”

“Oh, Emperor! I’m so sorry.... I’ll ask Rodrig. For something like this.... I’m sorry!”

Alysa accepted a hug, both of them weeping over the horror of it. “I know...,” she sobbed, “I know you’re going to bathe me sooner or later. I can’t stand the tension, the fear. I don’t sleep.”

“I told you, I would never do that...”

“You’ll have to, you’ll have to. The town won’t stand for it.”

A little more of Rodrig’s precious energy was used to stop Alysa’s bleeding, although he snapped one of his own fingers in his rage. Even worse, Alysa’s illness proved to be contagious, for no sooner had Malern gone back to her digging than she felt a warm trickle running down her own thigh.

“I know you’re going to bathe me sooner or later,” Alysa had said. Those words seemed like a prophesy the next day when Malern went into the garden and saw no results of any kind for all their hard work. *We’re still doing something wrong, but what?* Perhaps she needed to wait for the full moon?

Garvinger appeared outside the garden wall as though summoned from a lamp. He looked no older than Malern herself, but everybody knew he’d burned through three great-grandchildren to stay that way. He’d been castellan for over a hundred years, people said, and might even have known the Emperor Himself.

“It’s not going to work, you know,” he told her in his ancient, rasping voice.

“What do you care? My father’s gone now, you are unchallenged.”

“Except by you.” He smiled, his teeth glittering in the light of the sun. “Whatever Hroklyn thought of me, we would have agreed on this issue.”

“What issue—?”

He reached over the wall and grabbed her arm. “You already know.” He cast his eyes towards the house where Alysa was sleeping. “Your sister’s magic could keep you going. For years. Until you can have children of your own.”

She jerked away from him.

“Why must you always be so defiant, girl? You broke your father’s heart. You were his first-born and he loved you most of all, whatever you might think.”

“You just want me to be a monster like you. Feeding on his own descendants.” Garvinger’s face twisted then, as though it were about to split open, to burst. He took control of himself.

“You’ve fed well enough up to now, girl. I remember you and your wild revelries with all the bloody unicorns shitting in the Plaza. Magic is the heart of this place. Entrusted to us by the Great Emperor Himself, who was ancestor to us all. You didn’t know that, did you? He burned through fifty witches to

save us. Drove the rebels back a full day's travel in every direction. Show your gratitude. Take your sister to the Spring."

"The crops—"

"Crops? I doubt you even know what you planted, girl. But no matter. Whatever it is will be months in the growing."

*Months?* She allowed nothing to show on her face.

"You must do the right thing, Malern."

"Or what? Leave?"

"You can't leave, you idiot!"

*Maybe you can't, Garvinger.* A day's travel from the Spring, all magic stopped working. Carriages became pumpkins; jewels turned to rocks. All of Garvinger's stolen years would return to him in an instant. Malern however, had never altered her body with magic. She was still too young to have needed it.

She left him at the wall and woke her sister. "The seeds need months to grow. We have to get out of Kalegwyn or we'll starve. Tonight."

"Are you mad? We can't go! It's against the law! They'll hunt us down with flying carpets."

"Only if they suspect something. We'll leave in the dark. A day's travel and they can't touch us."

"I've never walked so far."

“We can do it ‘Lys. Go back to sleep. I’ll wake you when it’s time to go.”

“I don’t want the cage, Malern. They’ll catch us.”

“Go to sleep, pet. We’ll get out of here tonight.”

\* \* \*

Enforcers took Malern from her bed and bound her in ropes. They brought her to the Emperor’s Spring. Alysa would bathe her, they said, Alysa who had reported her attempted escape.

Alysa wept and held their father’s knife up to Malern’s throat. “Do you ask for death, Malern, Hroklyn’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

“You... you can’t. Nobody—”

Malern spat at her. “I choose death. It is my right.”

Alysa couldn’t bring herself to cut her sister’s throat, and that’s when Garvinger had her brought to his operating table and the surgeon swap her heart for a bag attached to her chest with a tube. “One way or another,” he had stated, “you will take part, Malern. You will be one of us.”

It was night-time when she came out again. Excited witnesses crowded the square, staring and laughing. What would the madwoman do next? Their voices tumbled around her as she staggered blinking amongst them.



“She’s not so high and mighty now!” one woman said from a floating cushion. “We only use magic because we have to!”

Malern thought about releasing her hold on the bag, but she wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of watching her fall in front of them. Instead, she trudged homeward, past the crumbling façades of empty houses where whole families had been turned into magic.

The first thing she noticed, even before opening the front door, was the empty cage in the window. Poor Rodrig had found his rest. She paused there, digesting the implications. It was only now that Malern understood Garvinger’s plan for her.

“Executed, but alive”—those had been his wishes. Nobody chooses death and nobody leaves and nobody ever refuses to take part. She had broken all three of these laws, but the last had hurt the citizens the most for it proved their evil was a choice. If she could live without destroying others, why couldn’t they?

This was why they had watched her go home so attentively, so eagerly. They knew she would be forced now to bathe her sister and restore her own heart. If she refused, if she stopped pumping and lay down to die, Alysa, who had no witch for her window, would be a vagabond when the sun rose again. Somebody else would claim her if Malern did not.

Malern closed the door behind her. “You will pump my heart, sister,” she said, handing over the bag.

Alysa nodded, already wearing her best clothing for the Spring. The fear that had twisted her was gone, and she spoke of the love she bore Malern and apologized for her betrayal. “I’ll be a good witch for you, sister. As long as I can.”

“I could kill you instead, Alysa, if you want.” She took down their father’s knife from above the fireplace. “They would burst in here to find us both dead.”

Instead, an hour before dawn, the sisters emerged to find the entire population of Kalegwyn waiting for them. They were all here but the Old Ones, the ones who had used the most magic in their lives, had pushed right to the front. Berkram had turned himself into a tiny winged fairy, buzzing about their ears. Erlokel swum through cobble and stone or floated lazily on her back as they passed. And Garvinger, who never wasted magic, who would live forever, led the whole procession on foot.

Nobody spoke. They kept pace with the sisters all the way to the Emperor’s Spring—a bubbling pool of water, actually, surrounded on three sides by walls of solid jade.

Malern almost fainted when she forgot to pump her heart. Alysa couldn’t help her now, for her hands had been ritually

bound to her torso. The chill crept up their legs as the pair of them waded into the pool together for the second time.

“Do you ask for death, Alysa, Hroklyn’s daughter?”

“No, sister.” Somebody had used a spell to amplify their voices. Every eye was on them, sparkling, encouraging.

“I wish to speak,” said Malern.

“Just be quick about it!” said Garvinger, but others wanted to hear what she had to say.

“Look at us,” she said. “There can’t be more than a few thousand faces here. Has anyone done a count? Half the houses are empty. Families I knew as a child are gone and others, like mine, are running out of pasture.

“What do you think will happen next? Some of you know already, and you are too clever to speak of it openly, but I am not. We still have rules about who may bathe whom, but a time is coming when the strong will raid the weak for witches, when —”

“Enough!” shouted Garvinger. “The sun is rising!”

The other Old Ones agreed loudly. They knew where she was going already. They knew. So, she shrugged and put her arm around Alysa’s trembling shoulders while the crowd edged closer and fairy Berkram clapped his tiny hands.

“I can’t,” said Malern.

“You refuse?”

“No, Garvinger. With the heart like this....” She held up the long, awkward tube, “I need a hand.”

“Ah!” he splashed forward to help her, but when he leaned down towards Alysa, he found the knife of Malern’s father at his left eye-ball.

“Should I kill you?” she asked.

“Of course not!”

He had refused an honest offer of death, so she kicked the legs from under him, and with Alysa’s help—whose arms had never been properly tied—she shoved him under the freezing, bubbling water of the Emperor’s Spring.

“What have you done?” he cried, when she allowed him back up. The very act of bathing him had made Garvinger her witch. No warts grew on his face yet, and it would be months before his wits would desert him and his body would hunch enough to fit comfortably in a cage. The crowd milled about in horror and confusion. But Malern knew that the clever ones would soon marshal their magic to destroy the lawbreakers. She would have time to command one spell of Garvinger and one spell only.

“Obey,” she said to him.

She could see him resisting, but he couldn’t help himself. “I... I obey.” Garvinger the Great sobbed like a child. Still, he opened his mouth and sounds of power emerged.

\* \* \*

An instant later, the two sisters found themselves a day's travel from Kalegwyn, with the sun rising above them.

Malern forgot to pump her heart for a moment, such was the strange beauty of the outside world. A single perfect line separated flat desert from rolling, wooded hills. Birds sang beyond the border. Flowers hung over the edge, but no bees would cross to visit them.

Alysa cried out in delight and sprang over the line to drink from a gurgling stream with cupped hands. Her silken dress turned to sack-cloth. Her golden ear-rings were simple stone again, but still, she was beautiful, freed at last from the weight of terror. She looked back. "Won't you cross, sister? They'll be flying after us, you know?" And then, she noticed the bag in Malern's fist. "Why didn't you get Garvinger to give you a new heart first?"

Malern shook her head. "There was no time, and regardless, the heart would have disappeared as soon as I crossed the border."

"Oh, oh! But... I will pump your bag for you as long as I live! I swear it!"

Malern smiled, keeping the sadness out of it. She had never realized what a beautiful place the world could be. "I can

manage for now, sister. Listen. Run on ahead and find us a..." what was it called? "...a road."

Alysa didn't need to be asked twice, springing off among the trees. She hadn't realized that Malern's bag was magic too. She would come running back in a panic as soon as she did.

*So I'd better be quick!*

Malern found it hard to step over the line. Nobody chooses death. Not really. But some lucky few can pick a place to fall and spend eternity. Onto mossy grass. Next to a stand of lavender where ecstatic bees bring life.

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*Peadar Ó Guilín is the author of two novels, The Inferior and The Deserter, both of which have appeared in numerous foreign language translations. His shorter fiction has been published by Weird Tales and Black Gate, amongst many others, and has been podcast by Pseudopod. Peadar lives in Ireland, where, as you read this, it is probably raining.*

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## THE GOD THIEVES

by Derek Künsken

Mateo del Monte Feltro was with his young daughter Luciana, praying to the god who would not fight, when an intelligence agent from the Bank of Saint George entered his house. After the fever took his wife and sons, Mateo had converted the west room into a chapel to the emaciated god nailed to the cross. Icons and amulets to other gods, he disposed of with respect. Though the gods who fought were unreasoning, the superstition that he might offend them was ingrained.

The agent was followed by two others and Vincenzo Selvaggi, Chief of Staff to the Master of the Intelligence Guild. Mateo removed his cap. Signor Selvaggi was an ascetic prodigy of magic, surgery, theo-taxonomy and theo-ecology. The Guild did not risk his genius on missions, and Mateo did not think him to be in the habit of visiting damaged operatives. Agents whispered that Signor Selvaggi put strange things into his skull, giving him access to magics and esoteric insights unmatched by other augments. The latest rumor, for what it



was worth, alleged that he carried a pair of fetal gryphon brains in his skull. Monstrous.

Luciana hid behind Mateo. He rested a gentle hand against her cheek.

“Don Mateo,” Signor Selvaggi said, with a voice as light as a castrati’s. “I am returning you to active status.”

“The board said I would not be recalled until my injuries had healed.”

“I am not so convinced as your surgeons that your... spiritual injuries prevent you from serving Genoa,” Signor Selvaggi said. “A man who follows two paths arrives nowhere.”

“My following the Christ does not interfere with my service to the Bank and Genoa. The Christ may have something to teach us.”

“Christ exists, but no engine will make him do anything useful.”

“His powers may be subtle,” Mateo said.

“Our strategic military needs are not. Venice has acquired a new theo-military asset. It is from the first circle.”

Mateo’s hands felt cold. He exhaled slowly, years of training keeping expression from his face, movement from his stance.

“I cannot give you the details here,” Signor Selvaggi said. “Come to the Bank.”

Mateo's stomach hollowed. First-circle. Probably every available operative was being recalled, no matter their condition.

He knelt and put a hand on Luciana's shoulder. Aging spies at least were the best liars. What tore at his innards never sounded in his voice.

"I must go for a trip, Luciana. I may be some time, but I will bring you back a present."

"You don't need to bring me a present, papa. You can stay if you want." He saw her trying to be brave, but tears collected at the edges of her eyes.

He hugged her and felt her hands make little fists around the sides of his shirt. He let her go, replaced his smile, and gently freed his shirt from her fingers. He could not look at her anymore without putting himself further under Signor Selvaggi's thumb. He rose and threw a tabard over his doublet and followed Signor Selvaggi into sun-stained, puddled streets.

Venice outpaced Genoa in the maritime trade with the Levant and Constantinople, but Genoa controlled the movement of capital and credit with the Bank of Saint George. Neither held an upper hand militarily. Where the Venetians could scour the Levant and Mediterranean for new gods to harness, the vast wealth of Genoa could attract knowledge of divine weapons from as far away as China, India, and beyond

the Sahara. A perilous balance. Much running but no movement. A new first-circle asset changed everything. It would leave Genoa a smoking ruin.

The Bank of Saint George came into view, a massive structure of brick and column work, a solid block of competence and wealth. They entered, passing layers of well-paid Mantuan condottieri with cross-bows and swords. At the lowest sub-basement, beneath even the vaults, two dour-faced Bank of Saint George marines met them before a high wooden door and a man-sized set of bronze scales, based on Egyptian magic.

The marines saluted, examined Mateo's license to carry an augment, and motioned him onto the Anubis scale. Mateo stepped onto one of the pans. It thumped against the wool padding beneath. On the other one, the marine set a luminescent feather of copper. He switched one feather for another from a collection of them in a blue velvet case until Mateo balanced against two copper feathers. Mateo weighed two souls. The marine saluted and repeated the process with Signor Selvaggi. The Anubis scale balanced with three feathers. It was true! Monstrous.

Past the door, Signor Selvaggi led Mateo a short distance to a curtain of light stretching across the corridor. Mateo had only been this deep into the Bank on three other occasions,

none of them pleasant. He stepped through the barrier into stomach-tipping eeriness. They were no longer in Genoa, or anywhere within the celestial spheres. Light traveled poorly here. Guttering lamps were blots of light without reference to the world.

They walked past laboratories with furnaces, crucibles and flasks, and others where strange expiring animals were kept. In a large office, Signor Selvaggi indicated a table flanked by two antique chairs festooned with Greek-styled icons: Juno, Ceres, Christ, Poseidon, Vulcan. Surely taken in the sack of Constantinople, when the fourth crusade had turned the mindless goddess Freya on Genoa's allies. A trophy of cunning.

Mateo sat gingerly. Behind the desk, eight inches of glass protected the room from the sanguine haze beyond— the slowly thumping heart of a god. The Guild's alchemists and philosophers were not only capable of implanting the brains of beasts into the skulls of men, but they'd co-opted the humoral immunity of a god and planted their headquarters inside its invulnerable body.

Geniuses or parasites. Cunning.

“What is the mission, Signor?”

“The Venetians have unearthed ancient texts about an Assyrian god called Enlil,” Signor Selvaggi said. “From the first circle. Fully weaponizable. They are constructing an Enlil

engine. You will steal the plans. They are being kept below the chambers of the Council of Ten in Venice.”

“But how? No one has ever penetrated the Armory of Venice,” Mateo said. There was no more secure place in the world, except for the Bank of Saint George.

“Not with normal magics,” Signor Selvaggi said.

Despite himself, Mateo leaned forward.

So did Signor Selvaggi. “I have a dragon augment for you, Don Mateo.”

Mateo sat back abruptly. “Not possible.”

An augment’s brain had to fit inside a man’s skull. Wyverns and basilisks had small brains. Despite this, they still had to be so lobotomized that nearly nothing of their personality was left to run the magic that operatives needed for espionage. A dragon’s brain was as large as a pony’s.

“I’ve cut everything from it,” Selvaggi whispered. “Appetite. Humoral systems. Motor nerves. Taste and smell centers. All that remain are the mapping cortex, the processing lobe, and the seat of the soul.” Mateo must have looked doubtful. Selvaggi leaned closer. “There’s more. It’s a hatchling. A twelfth the size of an adult.” He quivered with excitement.

“How? Did you take it by force?”

Esoteric beasts were dangerous, even as disembodied brains. Mateo wouldn’t want to be trapped in his own skull

with one that didn't want to be there. The Intelligence Guild usually acquired brains from ancient beasts willing to sacrifice the flesh to hide from mortality.

"This is no normal dragon," Selvaggi said. "It had been abandoned. Its egg had cracked. A mold infected it. Covered its scales."

Mateo pitied the creature abandoned by parents. He couldn't bear the thought of his own daughter possibly becoming an orphan.

"The power of this augment is like nothing we have ever seen," Selvaggi said. "It comes from the land of the Mongols, through the Portuguese. It knows all our magics and the magics of the Mongols."

"It won't prevent the Venetians from putting an arrow in me, or something worse," Mateo countered, "before I get anywhere near the Armory."

"The Intelligence Guild is not a safe trade at any time, but the cunning agent can exploit his advantages."

"Why me? There are better agents."

Selvaggi snorted. "Younger perhaps, but you are far more experienced. And only you have been able to unleash the full power of an augment."

"I'm not the same man I was, Signor. I don't know if my soul can do it anymore."

Selvaggi's face stiffened. "I will be frank with you, Don Mateo. I don't care about your soul. If this is about your Christ, you'd best make some decisions. We don't have anyone else to send in. I don't think anyone else could handle a dragon augment. So either Don Mateo takes the assignment, or Genoa is leveled."

Mateo's mouth dried. "Signor Selvaggi, there is no way to survive this mission."

"You will see," Selvaggi said. "This augment is unlike anything you've ever seen. An Apollo burst is a trifle for him. He can change your shape. His brain is not just one brain. His consciousness rides a series of small brains. He can decipher codes in moments. He can emit epiphany pulses under field conditions."

Mateo hid his astonishment with effort. This was too much power. "I still cannot enter the Palazzo Ducale," he said. "The Venetians can use an Anubis scale as well as we can."

"Hatchlings have small souls. The souls do not acquire the experience they need for growth for some time." Selvaggi smiled. "And what I did to its brain, I've done to its soul."

"You lobotomized a soul?" Mateo asked in horror.

"Parts of the soul are required; others are not," Selvaggi said, waving a hand. "The remains of its soul weigh almost nothing. And I know what to cut from yours."

“Mine?”

“I will trim small parts of it. With the dragon brain in your skull, you’ll weigh only one soul, the same as a normal man. The Anubis scales can blow in the wind for all that they will detect your augment and its magic!”

Mateo rose, retreating. “I have offered my life to Genoa, over and over. But my soul comes from God!”

Selvaggi stabbed a finger at him. “Your soul exists to wield augments to fight the enemies of Genoa. Decide your loyalties now, Don Mateo.”

The breath in him was thin and insufficient, and no more would come. In his mind, the emaciated god on his cross stood on one pan of the scales and all of Genoa on the other. Luciana on the other.

“Genoa, of course,” he said hoarsely.

\* \* \*

Mateo dreamed of overwhelming power, and of hell. Power washed heavy over his hands. Men harnessed power by joining themselves to mutilated monsters. Proud monsters became tools, like hammers with souls. Men prodded alight the power of insensate gods, through fires poked into other planes. Genoa stole the secrets of domesticating the gods from the Venetians. The Venetians stole from Genoa. Always chasing.



Always fleeing. Always hunting up new gods with which to destroy each other.

The night, months ago, when he had emptied his augment, they had run him to ground in a fig orchard between Venice and Milan. Forty of them. Condotierri. Fusiliers. Augmented operatives of the Venetian secret police. Pinned him with arquebus fire and lightning.

Desperate, flailing, Mateo snapped something in his augment, unleashing all the magic it would ever have, in that one moment. Light scoured the orchard, flaying bark from trees. It was a special kind of magic, the kind that peeled the world like an apple, exposing a place beneath it where numb gods hungered for souls. And the gods feasted that night. The forty faces haunted him always. Gods gnawed at them still, because Mateo served the gods who fought.

*You shall have no other gods before me.*

Mateo woke. Moonlight shone through his window. He slid to smooth wood and crawled to the corner. He prayed to the god who would not fight but who could reach the forty men Mateo had put in hell. The dragon brain, so newly in his skull, was silent.

“Our Father, Who art in Heaven....”

\* \* \*

Mateo arrived in Venice, ironically enough, on a papal ship carrying a nuncio seeking military aid. The beefy French cardinal was happy enough to take Genoese gold to hide a false priest on board. Mateo spent his days watching the restive horizon.

Batu, the new augment locked in Mateo's skull, was a tireless, if odd, conversationalist. Despite multiple lobotomies, he possessed remarkable identity and will. Perhaps this was the way with dragons.

Batu talked of dragonhood, of how dragons were raised on stories, even in the egg, and how father dragons protected the young after hatching and taught them to forage and hunt in the forests until they could rise into the sky to feed on the things that live in the ether. Batu spoke without a hint of blame in his tone, even though no father had wanted him.

The idea of Batu never growing to feed on those alien things in the ether seemed to Mateo to be the saddest of things. He tried to hide the feelings from Batu, but the rummaging little brain was tireless and snuffled out everything he wanted among Mateo's thoughts. Despite Batu's youth, he seemed to understand his host. Mateo's grief seemed to inspire some sympathy in the little dragon. Nor did Batu belittle Mateo's god. The Mongols followed only one god.

*Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the Earth.*

*Blessed are those who mourn; for they shall be comforted.*

‘Don Mateo, mood: darkening?’

Yes, Mateo thought hesitantly, as the low city of Venice emerged behind a thicket of masts.

‘Discipline, theology, concept afterlife reward: not testable,’ Batu pressed.

Mateo felt a sudden urge to protect this orphaned thing. Batu was childlike, lacking the nuance and faith of wisdom. Like Luciana.

*Not testable, Mateo thought, is not the same as untrue.*

‘Discipline, epistemology, concept rational method: work of gods measurable by heat or by product of force and distance,’ Batu said. ‘Product of distance and force applied by Christ equals zero.’

*Christ does not give power, Mateo thought. The beasts we harness like pack animals are not true gods. They are sources of power, like lamp oil. They lack agency. They are chaos given hunger. Christ is here to save us. To forgive us.*

Batu’s odd voice burbled but did not address Mateo anymore.

\* \* \*

Mateo disembarked, moving past port officials to mix into the press of traders, fishmongers and shore crew. Batu had

never seen a city in daytime. Had never, in fact, seen anything. Until the vivisection that had put his brain in Mateo's skull, Batu had lived a sickly life in a crate. He chattered endlessly, anxious for Mateo's safety, everything framed in the stuttering taxonomic perceptions of dragons. Mateo soothed him as he would a child.

Mateo walked over bridges and narrow cobbled streets to a quarter where houses crumbled among high weeds. Even squatters avoided this area. Batu's interrogative throbbed.

*Pestilence emptied this quarter, Mateo answered in his thoughts. People fear lingering ghosts, making it the perfect place for an equipment and information drop.*

Mateo stepped over brambles to a high chicken coop. Caked dust powdered the slatted door. Around him were nothing but crickets and bees. He stepped into the gloom.

*Give me night lenses, he thought.*

Batu filmed Mateo's eyes with a membrane that colored the shadows bright purple. The low sun shining through gaps in the walls brightened painfully.

*Cut night lenses, Mateo thought after a moment. Smell for magical fields and listening engines.*

The purple dissolved and then became a sea of spots, showing ambient magic in faint yellow splotches. Over the door frame, brightly outlined, a beetle walked. A listening engine.

Either the drop was compromised or this was one of the ubiquitous listening engines patrolling the city. They were domesticated from wild Egyptian scarabs and bred for souls large enough to power magical observations and transmitting visions. They sent the crude arrangements of fragmented color in the moment by Helios link, that tenuous, invisible light, but the beetle souls were small. Their visions needed to be re-emitted through a nearby Apollo junction.

Mateo had used only passive magic so far and likely hadn't triggered the engine, but he had to risk magic now to fetch his equipment. Time to see if his augment was as good as Selvaggi had promised.

*Batu, Mateo thought, emit an epiphany pulse, low range.*

Magic based on Apollo's power was logical, straight, following the tenets of Euclid. Its natural antagonist was the chaotic epiphany magic of Bacchus.

Brief, dizzy wildness confused Mateo.

Batu droned. 'Observation: sub-visual burst at twenty-five degrees, elevation forty-five degrees, range, six yards.'

The junction was dead. The scarab transmitted, but no one was receiving. No one would suspect an enemy operative. An epiphany pulse was not magic that was performed under field conditions.

Mateo lifted a flat floor-stone. In a hollow were an oiled sack and a well-made sword. The bag contained a nobleman's hose, tabard and surcoat. At the bottom of the bag was a stone bottle stoppered with gray wax.

Aletheia waters.

The river Lethe flowed deep underground, taking memories from those who drank of it. The knowledge drained into Aletheia, a deeper river of truth. The waters of the Lethe and the Aletheia were critical espionage and interrogation tools. Mateo cut the wax away and drank.

Disorientation. He choked.

Francesco Polani. He was Francesco Polani. Officer of the Guard of the Council of Ten. Sent to Mantua to negotiate a military contract with the condottieri lords. Ambushed there by Genoese spies. Forced to drink the waters of Lethe.

Mateo shuddered. Horrible fate. To forget everything. Did Mateo now carry Francesco's sins? He remembered them all.

*Batu*, Mateo thought, *change my face to match Francesco's*.

The bones under his cheeks widened. Skin tightened. Jaw receded. Not painful. Disturbing.

Mateo put on the clothes and emerged from the shack. He crossed back over bridges, winding through crowded markets to the Palazzo Ducale. Here were the ineffective senate, the

fiction of the Council of Ten and the Doge, and the reality of the Council of Three and their secret police.

A pang bit his heart at the sight of the Temple of Odin beside the Palazzo. The onion domes, gilded Byzantine mosaics, and soaring arches were once the Christian Basilica di San Marco, but like Christ Himself, His saints had never intervened in the affairs of men. While some faithful, like Mateo, sought the wisdom and grace of Christ, more pragmatic minds had remodeled the Church of Gold into an altar to Odin.

In his disguise, Mateo passed under the arches of the Palazzo to the inner courtyard. A guard at the doorway saluted him and opened the door onto a receiving chamber for Palazzo's Armory. The stained glass images of Roman gods near the high ceiling attenuated the thin light of day. Wall-mounted lamps and candles pooled warm light. Mateo stepped in, the first Genoese spy ever to enter the headquarters of Venice's infamous espionage service.

*Batu, keep your magic closed and tight. Give them nothing to smell.* Venice's secret police would have as many supernatural listeners, watchers, and sniffers as Genoa's Intelligence Guild.

A tall Anubis scale stood against the far wall, near a wide door leading into the depths of the Armory. An old officer

seated at a table beckoned him to approach. The door closed behind him.

“Name and business, signor?”

“Francesco Polani. Lieutenant of the Guard of the Council of Ten. I am returned from a foreign mission.”

The officer laboriously wrote out the name. He shuffled through older pages silently, searching. Mateo’s back sweated. Finally, the officer signaled a young sergeant in blue Council livery.

“Weigh the signor,” he ordered.

The sergeant led Mateo to the Anubis scale with its shining, gold-plated chains. Mateo stepped onto one scale. Another liveried man, a proud corporal with pox scars on his face, removed a silk coverlet from a shelf, revealing a set of copper feathers. He lifted one and placed it on the scale.

He frowned.

Mateo was heavier than the feather weighing one soul.

The sergeant’s posture hardened and his feet edged apart slightly. Mateo forced himself to look curious. The dragon brain in his skull felt like a furnace behind his eyes. The officer removed the feather and placed the next one, weighing eleven tens of a soul. Some people, particularly the wise and aged, could have souls within this variance.

Mateo still weighed more.



Was the Venetian Anubis scale more sensitive? Selvaggi himself had weighed Mateo in Genoa after implanting the augment. One soul.

“Very odd, Don Francesco,” the old sergeant said.

The corporal removed the feather and placed the next shining one on the scale. Mateo swayed as the plates balanced. He weighed six fifths of a soul.

*Batu! Apollo burst!*

Hot light flashed from Mateo’s skin. Men yelled, covering insulted eyes.

Mateo leapt from the scales. The door leading deeper into the Armory was right beside him but certainly locked. No time. The alarm had been raised.

Mateo ran to the door he’d come in by and yanked it open. He ran. Shouts sounded around him. A streak of purple light scored a column beside him. Another bloodied his arm, nearly throwing him to the cobblestones. Then he was on the streets, heart knocking loud in a hollow chest. Feet followed. Mateo plunged into the crowd. Swirling complaints eddied in his wake.

*Batu! Give me my face back!*

Mateo cast off Francesco’s surcoat and tabard. He ducked into an alley.

He'd struck the hive but not gotten close to the honey. The bees would now be everywhere. A lesser operative would now look for his extraction contact, get across the swamps before he was caught. Youth was sometimes too quick to act. As were the Venetians. The last thing they expected him to do was to go back to the enraged hive.

Mateo slowed as he came around the next corner, turning back towards the Temple of Odin, wearing the new face, his own. Across the plaza, all eyes were on the Palazzo. Armed men poured from the Armory. Shouts sounded in the alley he'd come through. He walked across the plaza, as calmly as any nosy gawker. He reached the temple and ordered Batu to unlock the door.

A temple was not like a church. A temple was a state military asset. People were not welcome. There was no reason to welcome them. Odin had no relationship with anyone in Venice; he was a gibbering monster of overripe flesh and rudderless power. His worship was conducted by colonels, not priests. Worship was the application of pain, with results familiar to anyone who had ever harnessed mule to plow.

Mateo stepped into the cool interior and closed the door behind him. Christ had been scraped from the dome and replaced with Norman artifacts and iconography. A dusty machine as large as a house dominated the center of the old

basilica. Its gears and axles of ox and deer bone were quiescent, waiting for their colonels. Powered with enough blood, the machine would spin holes in the world, to where Odin floated in embryonic decay, without intent or meaning. Gunpowder waiting on fire.

Genoa had one just like it.

Mateo bandaged his arm quickly, cursing Selvaggi. Although he carried a dragon augment, he bled like an apprentice carrying his first goblin augment. The door handle behind him rattled. Mateo leapt into the east chapel. A man stepped in, an elite agent, like Mateo, not one of the Mantuan condottieri or Venetian regulars. Through Batu, Mateo felt other senses fluttering outward, smelling for magic. Batu wasn't using magic, and that made Mateo invisible to any augments smelling for it. The enemy agent would have to find him with his eyes.

The man peered into the west chapel and then paced the basilica with a suspicious step. Mateo hugged the back of a column as the agent entered the east chapel with a bare sword.

Mateo stepped behind him on soft boots and touched him, letting Batu overwhelm both the agent and his basilisk augment. The man fell backwards. Mateo dragged him behind the column.

Safe for the moment, but what was he to do?

Selvaggi's plan had gone awry. The minor cutting of Mateo's soul had made room for Batu's lobotomized one, but one of the two had grown. Perhaps the childlike Batu was becoming wise too quickly. If so, his curiosity was thwarting the best intelligence efforts of Genoa and had nearly gotten Mateo killed. He leaned against the wall, cradling the head of the man whose soul he was now responsible for. Like the lives of all of Genoa. He sighed.

*Batu, Mateo thought, kill his augment, silently.*

'Set analysis: concept, killing, contained in set designated immoral acts?'

*I need the man's memories and soul. Do as I say.*

Mateo pulled out the man's knife. And prayed.

*Batu, together you and I weigh six fifths of a soul. Cut away a fifth of this man's soul, so that the three of us together weigh exactly two souls. With his clothing and appearance, we may get past their security.*

'Augment Batu, surgical skills: untrained.'

*Do your best.*

'Process: Weight verification without Anubis scale?'

*Estimate.*

'Projection: estimated error rate greater than tolerances for success,' Batu said. 'Subject's soul not mapped by weight.'

Mateo sighed. ‘Available: weight map of Don Mateo soul, recently measured to high precision.’

Mateo’s stomach twisted upon itself. *Cut my soul again?* Could he be emptied even more?

Christ wanted something; not for Himself, but for Mateo’s soul. And Mateo had already allowed his soul to be mutilated. What harm had that cutting done him? Was his moral sense damaged? Could he receive grace anymore? He’d damned those men in the orchard, not to protect Genoa but to protect Luciana. He’d exchanged their eternity for her present. Like a god of appetite. How much grace could be poured into a cup so fouled by its owner? No act of atonement could compensate.

The Venetian agent lay before him. His sparse whiskers and smooth face might have made him of an age with Mateo’s dead sons. His sons were gone, but perhaps, if Christ had spoken truly, they were beside the god who would not fight. Mateo, with his crimes for Genoa, might never join them, but maybe this man-boy could if Mateo would take that burden upon himself. Save Genoa. Save Luciana. Give this man-boy a chance for grace. Cut away part of his own soul, instead of the boy’s.

*How would it work, Batu?* Mateo asked.

‘Anatomical analysis: the third facet of the soul does not contain coding sequences,’ Batu answered.

Mateo regretted his ignorance of the soul's anatomy. Selvaggi's surgery had been small and targeted. This suggestion was akin to asking an apprentice butcher to lop off his arm. What would he lose now?

It didn't matter. Luciana mattered.

*Do it, Batu.*

A very physical pain snapped inward, like a rock through stained glass.

Disorientation. Sadness. Numbness. Nausea.

Not at all like Selvaggi's minor amputation.

Mateo donned the man's livery. Then, he put his knife to the young man's thinly-whiskered throat.

*Hold his soul, Batu.*

'Emotional analysis: Don Mateo suffers from killing.'

*Hold the soul.*

The sharp knife parted the skin, the muscle, and caught on the wind pipe. Bright blood gushed. The soul joined them, in Mateo's skull. The youth was no innocent, but Mateo's sacrifice had kept him whole, given him a chance for grace.

"Bless you," Mateo said.

His heart thumped dumbly. He had not meant it. The blessing was just words. Sounds.

"Please, Lord, keep him safe," he said, aching to mean it. But he did not. He was empty.

*Batu! What did you cut?*

‘Anatomical analysis: Excised section does not code for any emotive functions, spiritual pathways, or esoteric sensory processing traits. Don Mateo is experiencing a spiritual-somatic reaction.’

The door to the basilica banged open.

“Stefano!” someone yelled.

*Batu, change my shape to match Stefano’s!*

Mateo jumped from the corpse on the floor. Once again, bones shifted in his cheeks, like someone pulling him from the inside.

“I’m done searching,” Mateo yelled back, already in Stefano’s voice, emerging from the east chapel. “But I didn’t even find dog shit.”

“Then look for shit outside.”

Mateo followed the senior agent into the blanching harshness of noontime sun and locked the basilica door. He had played soldier on many missions: condottieri mercenary, city loyalist, naval marine. No one had penetrated his disguises.

His squad scoured the plaza and side streets all afternoon. Near nightfall, they returned to the Armory. Other squads reported back at the same time and Mateo mingled in, following a pair who walked purposefully to the door of the reception room he’d so recently fled. Mateo slipped in with

them, waiting with the bored patience of a tired soldier. The other two showed their licenses to carry augments and signed in with the seated sergeant. Then, the three of them eyed Mateo. He pulled out Stefano's license and gave it to the sergeant.

"The Captain told me he wanted an extra hand here tonight," Mateo said.

The sergeant grunted, then jerked his thumb towards the Anubis scale that had exposed Mateo only hours before. "I'm not taking any chances," he said.

Mateo stepped onto one of the polished plates. They switched one finely-wrought copper feather for another, over and over, while he bobbed on the scale, like a gondola in the lagoon. Finally, they found the balance. Two feathers. Two souls. Precisely.

The sergeant noted this with stained fingers, then rose, belted on his sword, and told them to lock the door after him. He left into the waxing night. One of the men locked the door. The other claimed the chair, pulling out a set of dice and a few coins. Mateo pulled out his coin pouch and leaned onto the table

After a few rounds, it was Mateo's turn to throw. It was easy to cheat at dice using a Thoth device, but all three were



using their augments to smell for magic. The room itself was also set with sensors keyed to detect any magical emanations.

Mateo had to play this physically.

He tossed the dice a little too hard, rolling one off the table. The two men watched it tumble over. The nearest stooped to pick it up. Mateo rammed the edge of his hand into the seated man's throat, crushing it. Before the other could even turn, Mateo was upon him with a knife, under the chin, slicing wide. He finished the gasping soldier in the chair before the man's augment could call for help.

Mateo stepped to the door of the inner Armory but did not touch it. It would be physically locked, and certainly magically, at least with a Janus lock and more probably with a Cardea chain or a Portunes weave. All were arts of the known world. The art of the Mongols was not.

*Batu, it is time for the Odlek clock.*

The Mongols' single god, Tengri, had different embodiments. Odlek was Tengri's personification of time. While the magics of the door might be warded against the cyclic seasonal effects of Chronus, Odlek's time was deep and linear. And none of the alarms would detect Odlek.

Batu loosed waves of corroding time. Dry rot filmed the door. Decades warped the boards. Dust rained from splitting wood. The protective magics, never meant to last decades,

much less centuries, failed. The remnants of wood, like a net of lace, powdered silently to the floor.

The corridor beyond led to the inner sanctum of Venice. Stone walls sweated water onto the marble floor. Oil lamps pushed doughy light into darkness. Mateo crept in, clinging to the shadows.

Listening scarabs were certainly transmitting his location. Mateo couldn't reveal his abilities yet. He needed to draw them out. He pulled free his sword, surprising a man emerging from a laboratory. Mateo gritted his teeth and plunged his blade into the man's throat.

Two Venetian operatives bared their swords behind him. Mateo spun, knocking back their weapons. An operative electrified his own blade with a Jupiter tongue, shocking Mateo back. Four others appeared. They surrounded him. They were close enough.

*Batu! Give me a Vulcan storm!*

'Negative,' Batu said. 'Harm to Don Mateo's soul proportional to quantity of killing.'

*What? Do it now! Or we both die!*

A sword point bit deep into the muscles of Mateo's shoulder.

'Theological belief, subset Don Mateo: soul more important,' Batu chattered.

Mateo knocked away two swords. *I've made my choices, Batu! Obey me!*

The Vulcan storm was a weapon for a battlefield of cannon and arquebusiers, prior to footmen and lancers diving in. It was too big to use in close quarters without consuming its summoner. This was true for basilisk, goblin, and wyvern, but Mateo carried a dragon brain.

Mateo's skin hardened, stiffening his movements. Then yellow fire bloomed before him. Finding no room to grow, it shot down the corridor, cooking the air dry. Fuzziness filmed his sight as a membrane of dragon-eye shuttered over his own. Mateo's clothes burned. His sword softened in his hand, the leather of the hilt charring. The Venetians were incinerated on their feet before the yawning whump of expanding fire dashed their ashes away.

Mateo, in his dragon skin, stepped woodenly over blackened bodies. Slate-colored smoke shuttered the hot orange light of the burning ceilings. A wooden door lay in flaming splinters. Beyond it, a membranous veil separated this world from the esoteric one, the skin of the world scraped passable by magic. Mateo stepped through.

Instead of a vast headquarters like the one Genoa had hidden in a god, only a small laboratory lay beyond the doorway in Venice. Thick glass on walls of imported stone

showed orange god-blood. White blobs gnawed at the scored glass, eroding, scratch by scratch. The Venetians had not succeeded in co-opting the god's humoral response.

He recognized some of the engines by the layouts of their piping. Genoa had similar models. The Shamash engine. The Neptune driver. The Balder point. None of these were important. Genoa already had engines for all these gods. Beside each were massive codices showing how to build and work the devices.

But the configurations of two of the engines were unfamiliar. Each was as large as a hay wagon, tall with copper pipes, greased gears, and polished mirrors. Deep beneath rotors and flywheels, the layout of the piping became difficult to view, the angles no longer fitting neatly into the three dimensions of the world. Imaginary angles led to dimensions governed by ordinal number systems where gods slavered.

Which one was the Enlil engine? Had Venice weaponized two new gods? His escape plan only included carrying one codex. He didn't have the strength to make off with both, and he couldn't commit the safety of Genoa to a coin toss.

He opened the first codex. Everything was ciphered. Even the symbols were slippery to the eye. Magical encryption was based on the factoring of imaginary numbers. Only esoteric beasts could perform such maddening calculations.

*Batu, decrypt the text.*

The dragon brain hummed. ‘Decryption key formed,’ Batu said. ‘Codex describes the Grace engine.’

*Then the other codex contains the plans for the Enlil engine, Mateo thought. But what is the Grace engine?*

‘Grace engine function: to move the god who will not fight,’ Batu said. ‘Deliver grace. Wash a soul clean of sin.’

“What?” Mateo asked out loud, suddenly cold. *Forgiveness?*

‘Function not limited to forgiveness. Includes sanctification,’ Batu said.

Mateo’s stomach lurched. *What do you mean ‘sanctity’?*

‘Concept, theological, subset sanctity: the especial holiness of those who have been touched by Christ,’ Batu said. ‘Those who can work miracles.’

To work miracles. To save souls, both living and dead. To bring grace to the souls Mateo had consigned to hells. To be forgiven.

*Batu, can we carry both?*

‘Calculation: combined weight of codices exceeds tolerances.’

Nor could Mateo receive the benefits of the Grace engine now. It would need hours to heat up, align its mirrors and spin its governors to the right speed. And Mateo was no engineer.

Could grace be used as a weapon? To counter the Enlil engine?

No. Christ was healing. The souls of those Mateo had sent to hell stared up from memory with yawning, worm-eaten eyes.

Apostlehood and sanctity. Healing of his soul. Healing of all souls he touched. Or a device of unutterable destruction.

*Thou shalt have no other god above me.*

Could his mutilated soul be trusted to choose?

If he returned with the Grace engine codex, Venice would inflict Enlil upon Genoa, followed by mercenary troops. Mateo would be killed. Luciana would be shipped into slavery or killed.

Clean souls. Dead bodies. They would meet in Heaven. With Christ.

*Luciana.*

He hefted the Enlil codex. He had no tears to offer forsaken grace. He struggled to the portal with the weight of the great book. Past the veil, in the real world, the stones were hot under naked feet. Stinging smoke hovered. Voices sounded. Straight, cutting shines from Apollo lenses wobbled in the distance.

He was cut off from the exit, and the last dragon trick had to be played. This was why Selvaggi had sent Mateo. Mateo could pull all the magic of an augment, all at once.

*I am sorry, Batu.*

‘Batu forgives.’

*Then fly*, Mateo whispered, opening the dragon’s mind wide.

The ground crumpled. The ceiling sheared open, dropping paving stones and building blocks around him.

They leapt into the night sky.

This was not the flight of a Persian or Slav dragon on leathern wings. This was the flight of a wingless Mongol dragon, whose young rose into the heavens on their own like worms on hooks.

They hurtled towards Genoa.

Mateo clutched the Enlil codex tighter, even as Batu’s voice slipped from his mind. He now sailed through the ether alone, above still clouds, riding the last of Batu’s magic back to Genoa. The grace was gone. The cup too fouled. He had become like the gods.

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## COVER ART

“New Lands,” by Rado Javor



*Rado Javor is a Slovak artist who splits his time between Bratislava and the UK. His favorite subjects include gothic Colonial America, WWI aircraft, dark science-fiction, and Napoleonic naval engagements, many of which were featured in the game Empire: Total War. See more of his work at <http://radojavor.com/>.*

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