

CIRCLING

the

ABYSS



THE IX AGE
FANTASY BATTLES

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I

Nazario Calegari comes to the gates of Hell

I awoke from a fugue to find myself among a dark and twisted land of rock, beneath a sky that swirled, coalesced and divided in a kaleidoscope of every natural and unnatural hue. I rose and staggered forward, seeking a path through the crags I found myself among. Behind me came a growl that chilled my blood - if indeed blood still flowed within my form in this place. Turning, I beheld a great hound with three heads, and glowing eyes fixed upon me, standing astride the path leading back to my previous life.

Expecting an attack any second, I stumbled on, putting ridges between myself and the beast, gasping for breath. In that moment did my guide find me. He stood, imperturbable, encased in the thick steel of a Warrior, adorned with a green cloak and the sigils of Kuulima. His face, handsome but with a bitter twist to it, struck me as familiar - though I could not say from whence that knowledge came. Nevertheless, I thanked him with the fervour of a brother.

"Kind sir, who are you to have spared me disaster, to join me in this moment and share the burden of this desolate land, to which I have come yet may not leave?"

He regarded me for long moments before issuing reply, perhaps weighing my worth, or else considering the imperative which saw him aid me. As though to himself, he began:

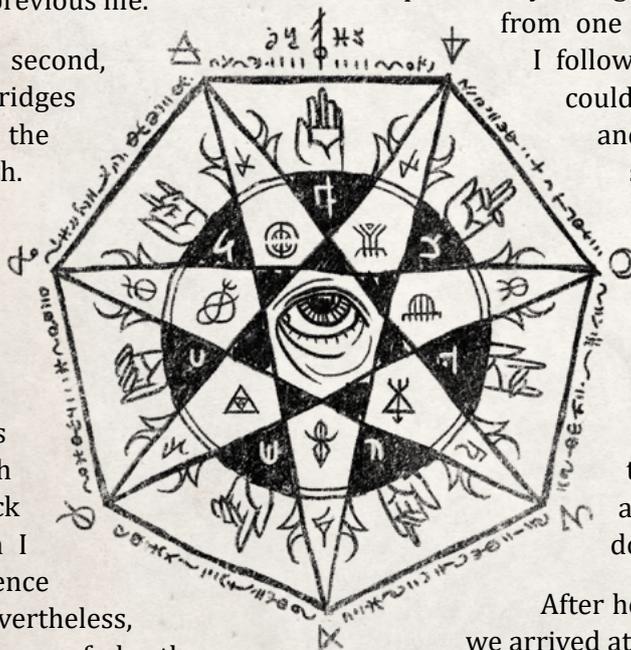
"You cannot be the meek thing you appear, for the weak of spirit are not permitted passage to this

place, which is anathema to flesh. I suggest you recover your will and resolve, should you intend to survive this journey. Many do not. As for my name, such as it was, it has not been uttered in centuries, save by those who would scour it with their acid tongues. Call me Betrayer. I choose the chains they would force upon me. Now, come.

With that he strode away - or at least appeared to stride. This Immortal Realm, as I knew it must be, adapted to my thoughts and intentions, flowing from one position to the next, and I followed the Betrayer as best I could. All around me, far distant and yet clear to my eye, other spheres glittered in the swirling void, and for a moment I perceived a sacred glade holy to an elven deity, and a great stone holdfast of a god of dwarves. Gone as swiftly as they came, I perceived this place I stood to be one among many, the myriad domains of a single Realm.

After hours - or within moments - we arrived at the banks of a great river. I know now that all people see their own form of passage into the lands beyond. For me it was a deep, dark waterway, whose eddies and swirls made the sound not of babbling liquid but of groaning souls.

On the banks of that river, a ways upstream, I observed a huge encampment, home to tens or hundreds of thousands. I did not have the opportunity to study this ragged city in any detail, but I glimpsed a great diversity of humans and other species going about their business. Many wore the garb of the Makhar, the Åsklanders,



and all manner of tribal peoples among whom worship of the Dark Gods is widespread. I have come to believe that it was here, within view of Hell itself, that those who worship the Dark Gods find an afterlife in return for their faith. In contrast, the scenes I would witness in the realms beyond the river are the exclusive preserve of those who have sworn their souls, making the official pact with one of the Seven, to gain power in their mortal lives.

A shape resolved itself in the centre of the river: a boat, slowly but inexorably poled towards our shore. The boatman itself was an enigma. One moment a hulking brute driving the vessel, the next a writhing mass facing in all directions. Finally settling upon a cloaked shape, cowed and silent, the boat drew close to us, its sentinel governing entrance to the land beyond.

And what a realm. Beyond the far shore, in dimensions I cannot conceive let alone describe, seven rings passed over, under, between and through one another. Like a juggler's trick, those circles switched position, each rising to the surface, or sinking far beneath. Underneath all that chaotic motion, a deeper power throbbed, an emanation of strength and a grasping void all at once. Each circle seemed to push down toward it, only to be supplanted by another, then another.

Finally, I truly understood my predicament. Seeing realisation dawn, the Betrayer smirked acknowledgement.

"Few mortals indeed are offered the chance to walk Hell's paths. If you are fortunate, you may even be permitted to leave again with me. Now, let us proceed. The Father, and the Seven, are not patient, and you are standing before their gates."

With that, he stepped aboard the boat. I steeled myself, daring to believe that this journey was

a sign of favour, for if I was not protected by a greater power, how else could I have come to this land and not be annihilated by its undiluted furnace of magic?

The boat drifted silently into that black water, and the shifting levels of the Abyss drew ever closer.



II

Gold Tarnished, Bettini's Ruin

Stepping into the Circle of Sugulag, the ground beneath my feet clinked and crunched, the metallic sounds of coins strewn all about. Currencies of all nations carpeted that place, bearing likenesses of monarchs long dead, or perhaps still to be born. No simple physical objects though; those faces grinned or screamed, cackling or weeping, until I dreaded to take another step.

My guide pressed forward, dismissive of such concerns, and I was drawn on in his wake, shuddering at muffled cries beneath my feet, certain that each was another mortal soul bound to serve the great Collector.

In time we came to a place where souls in human form laboured without respite. Each pushed and hauled at great weights, though they seemed to lack either value or destination. Some were naked, stripped of any dignity along with their garb, yet others bore remnants of vestments worn in life. To my surprise I knew the face of one such beside me, adorned in clerical robes.

"Alessandro Bettini!" I cried. "My old friend. What disasters have brought you to this place? I knew your family to be the most devout in all of Pontefreddo. I never imagined you to follow the Dark Gods."

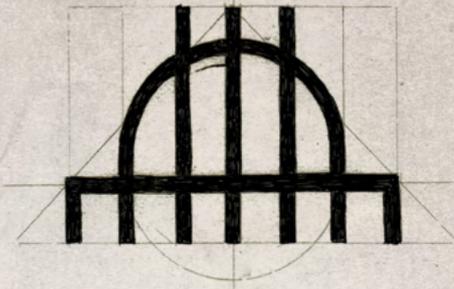
My erstwhile comrade and confidant turned a disbelieving stare upon me, though he never ceased his backbreaking labour.

"Nazario! How came you to this dark place, without chains or burdens of your own? Nay, you are more real than any spirit in this place. Hear well my tale, lest you find your soul in this same mire."

"Our fair city had fallen upon hard times, for we had suffered the worst harvest in memory.

My family relied upon grain for our coffers and standing; with revenues falling, it fell to me to preserve the Bettini name from those jackals who would tear it down. The appointment of church office carries great value to those wishing to rise quickly, and I was able to fulfil many ambitions... at a price."





At this talk of wealth and gain, Alessandro seemed on the verge of joy. Such emotion could not linger in those environs though, and his burden appeared to triple in weight, such that my friend's efforts could barely propel it at all. Still, he took no respite from his labours – or more likely could not.

“When the Elders learned of my actions, they struck me down with a vengeance, all the more merciless to conceal how many partook of the very same crimes. Execution awaited, yet a representative of Sugulag offered me a path to redemption. Swear, strike off my chains, and raise the city against the wretches who held it, and everlasting glory could be mine.”

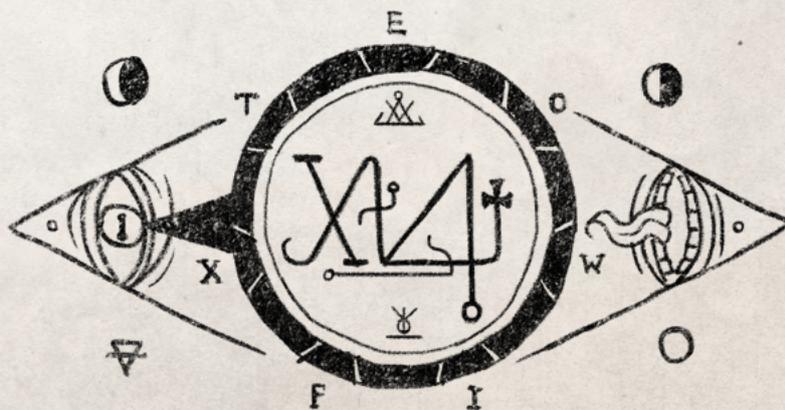
At this last, the once-Bishop crumbled beneath his burdens, weeping and still crawling ever forward. I turned away, and rejoined the Betrayer upon a path between iron-bound chests, each baring cruel teeth and stained with blood. Upon request, my taciturn mentor recounted the fate of the Bettini.

“A swift rebellion, and bloody. He did well to turn so many in secret, enough that Pontefreddo shook

to her foundations. Yet, at the last, he lacked the conviction to press the advantage, lacked the vision to see the city razed. Petty ambitions cannot keep the eye of our Dark Masters; to see fulfilment in one town, one city, one family, that is to prove oneself mediocre. Bettini was nothing more than a wretched beast before the end.”

I nodded gravely, comprehending that excommunication by the Church was a small concern beside the fate which awaited those who disappointed their Dark God. Here, in this place of chaos and change, doom came in forms to surpass any mortal words.

Lesson delivered, the Betrayer led on to the edge of this Circle, through a narrow archway strewn about with visions of worldly possessions abandoned by any who would pass this way, and into the Void once more. After a moment's pause, I retrieved my medallion of office, hanging it from the archway. My guide took a more... visceral approach, drawing a blade across his palm and letting drops of blood fall to the ground, a wolfish grin directed at me before he strode through the portal.



III

Appetites Unsated, Familial Tastes

Brown and putrid clouds circled overhead as I found myself entering the Circle of Akaan. I felt moisture fill the air as a terrible rain of black and viscous liquid fell from that smog, staining the very ground. We sheltered for a time beneath an overhanging rock, and I observed the terrain scoured and pitted by the deluge. I knew that only my purpose insulated my body from a similar fate.

It was clear the torrent would not soon, if ever, abate, and so we set off into the storm to cross that barren and hungry landscape, coming in time to the entrance to a great valley. Sharp pinnacles of rock lined its edge, and for a moment my vision shifted and I perceived a vast and terrible maw, set to consume the world. Blinking, I saw stone and earth once more, yet I trembled to step forward.

A short distance into the shade of the canyon, I was confronted with echoes that reverberated and grew louder second by second. At first, the sounds were formless and menacing, but soon they resolved into a slavering, snarling noise torn from many throats at once. Rounding a corner, we were confronted by a pack of beasts, as disturbing in appearance as they were dangerous.

Oft named bloat flies, I have witnessed their type in our own Realm, taking on corpulent forms with gossamer wings that defy gravity to hover grotesquely. They attack and consume any living thing, with more mouths than a single creature should ever possess. Such is the nature of their horrible visage, I have witnessed the most gifted of duelists left bewildered, not knowing where to attack, only to overcome their revulsion, strike home and be felled by gouts of deadly ichor from the wound.

In the Immortal Realm, their physiology was even more troublesome to behold. Each moment saw another mouth or another row of teeth spawn,

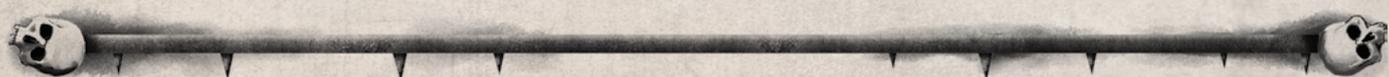
while they moved on unnatural legs, slithering tails, or simply floated through the air; like an airship composed of fanged jaws. Their attention was focused upon us and they made their uncanny way along the valley toward our position.

A rustling behind me drew my gaze to the Betrayer, who calmly reached within a sack and drew out chunks of dripping meat. With a nonchalant air, he hurled them to one side of the canyon, leading me along the other. As we circled the beasts, now intent on their repast, my guide explained:

“Most daemons, most immortals could not consume objects from our world, any more than you could consume pure magic. At least without the protections of our Masters. Those who serve Akaan are not like the others. Mortal weapons may still harm them, but they hunger for scraps of the world the Devourer longs to absorb.” With that he grinned toward me, a cruel glint in his eye. “Your fleshy form would have made for quite the feast, had your purpose not seen you protected. Still, best not to test their obedience against their appetite. The outcome is never entirely certain.”

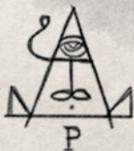
We continued in silence for a time, as the valley grew darker, and what passed for sky in this Realm narrowed above to a tiny sliver of sickly light. From the gloom ahead came new sounds of consumption: the repulsive mastication of raw flesh between blunt teeth. Reaching the source of those noises, dim shapes resolved into crouched figures, each grasping a hunk of meat. None met my gaze, or even looked away from the ground and their horrible task.

The only one to move at all shambled past us, reaching the source of her unholy repast: a human form, with pieces torn from it, seeming to reform as it was consumed in perpetual misery. Finally getting a clear look at her face, the true





horror of her predicament struck home. The body upon which she feasted bore an uncanny resemblance to her own, that of a family member, a daughter. Tears streamed down her face, and my own eyes watered before I pulled back from the terrible scene and stumbled deeper into the canyon to escape this awful place, followed by the dark chuckles of the Betrayer.



IV

A Forlorn Forest, The Betrayer Dreams

Time slowed and stretched as I entered the Circle of Nukuja, as though the air itself congealed. Lethargy settled upon me, like a chill in my bones, until I slumped under the weight of apathy. Even the Betrayer, so certain in his actions, appeared to hesitate and falter beneath that terrible burden.

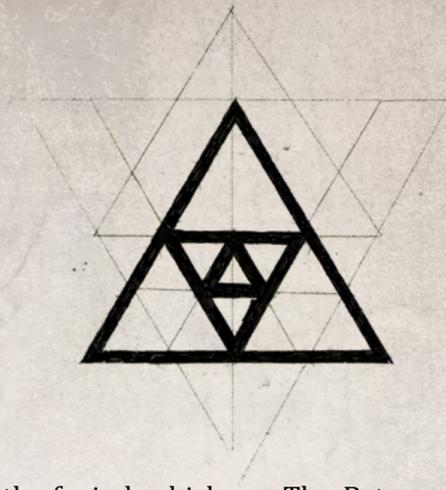
Before us, the source of our listlessness would soon become apparent, as forms emerged from the gloom of that place. Trees of myriad shapes dotted the landscape, stunted things, their trunks and branches gnarled, knots and hollows giving the impression of faces drawn in anguish.

A creaking groan from one such apparition drew my attention, yet I could not muster the vigour to step towards it until I heard my own name. Drawing close, I heard a dry whisper, like the rustling of dying leaves.

“You know me not, but I know you Nazario Calegari, illustrious of Pontefreddo, destined for greatness from the moment you drew breath, while I was but a humble citizen of that noble city in times long past. Now you flirt with the Father, who would have your talents for his own, to spread his glory and the tales of his Seven. In his hand you walk now.”

“Beware Calegari, that you walk the right path. Choose wrong, and the mantle of Father Chaos may fall from your shoulders. Those who once walk in his ambit rarely find comfort in the cold. If you would escape disaster, recall this in years to come. Under a red moon, when horns call and the ground shakes, all must spur west and strike the elven threat, afore ritual concludes.”





Finally, in a murmur like a breath of wind, which had me leaning close:

“Trust not the Betrayer. His name is well earned. He seeks the favour of the Father, and will serve loyally while it suits his ends. To rely upon his good faith is to court ruin, as his Mistress found to her cost. Take heed, our gaolor approaches.”

With that, the tree fell silent. Turning, I was confronted by another, larger and more menacing than anything else in the thicket. It loomed over the Betrayer and I both, unmoving, yet it had not been there moments before, I was certain. I would later come to know the Hope Harvester in the shapes it takes in our world. Always lumbering beings, yet to be near them is to risk life and limb, for it takes energy from its victims, then their lives.

Spurred into action, I dragged the Betrayer away from his reverie, and away from that mournful forest. As we drew near to leaving this place of indolence, we walked alongside a plain of burning sand, where desperate souls were driven to walk in endless circles, with no respite from the searing pain save to move continuously.

The Betrayer muttered grudging thanks for my part in our escape from the Harvester. I enquired of him what dreams had captivated him so that he was drawn from our journey through this Realm.

“Another time, another place. My homeland is much changed since my days there, long past now. Kuulima has gifted me the endurance to see my return come to fruition. Those who have scorned my name and legacy will learn the folly of their conduct.”

Shaking himself from his reverie, we strode together, deeper into the Void. For a brief moment I recalled the words of warning regarding my companion, yet I felt a growing connection with the taciturn Warrior of Envy.



V

Deceiver Détente, Unity and Division

The Circle of Kuulima was a panoply of iconography and imagery. I witnessed representations of relics from Vetian religions of our own times, alongside artefacts of pantheons long dead and buried. Banners and statues of all nations adorned architecture spanning dozens of cultures. It gave an impression of a museum in Sonnstahl, containing items from myriad civilisations, or else a wealthy merchant's home, bedecked more for spectacle than any sense of elegance.

The way ahead crossed a gilded bridge, surrounded by plinths displaying helms of all shapes, each sundered by a blow which would have laid the wearer low, be they elf, man, dwarf, orc or any other creature. Beneath this glittering span a river flowed, the liquid within bright green, verdant and sickly. Yet no true water ever bubbled and hissed as that brook did.



As our feet reached the start of the arch we were confronted by a horde of chittering daemons, clambering out from under the bridge and arraying across its span, blocking our path and snarling. Each moment their form shimmered and changed, as they adopted aspects of my appearance: the robes I had donned that morning, the bronze pomander gifted to me by the Sage Werdin, the sturdy boots I purchased on the advice of a cavalry officer years past.

No great daemons these. Their image constantly altered, reflecting a lack of will. They chattered and bared teeth in our direction, an animosity clear to behold. But their attention was on my guide – at no

point did they adopt his armoured visage, and their eyes never left him as they snarled. A sneer curled his lips as he stared down those creatures blocking his path, as though he would simply stomp them into the ground should they fail to part.

In a wave from the back of the crowd, the fluctuating figures suddenly fixed, tiny soldiers of humanoid form, with skin of shimmering silver. Then, like fish before a predator, they scattered in all directions, disappearing from view. In their place stood a being of disconcerting appearance. A gilded breastplate of Destrian design was coupled with a gleaming Qassari shield, resplendent with heraldry of Kuulima. A helm like that of a highborn elf was topped with a plume of white hair draping down to an engraved gorget.

The daemon itself appeared almost human, yet no human ever possessed such proportions, save in a sculptor's nightmares. Its head appeared overly large, features exaggerated, with eyes that burned like torches and a sharp-toothed smile extending far wider than should have been possible. Its skin was a bright argent, rippling with strange muscles and seeming to meld into its armour. Even the weapon it bore, a Sonnstahler greatsword of almost absurd scale, seemed an extension of itself. All these incongruous elements should have looked ridiculous, the strangest of chimeric creatures, but I was left with the sense of an imperious presence.

None of the hesitation of the lesser entities was visible here; this daemon was assured and unflinching. It stood upon the bridge with complete self-possession, sword held indifferently propped on the ground. Only the intensity of those eyes gave the lie to its idle stance. I felt utterly immaterial to this impasse, as my companion bristled under that scrutiny. Moments dragged out, the air seemed to crackle with intensity, and both parties subtly flexed limbs and hefted arms.





The moment was broken as, almost simultaneously, each gave the smallest of nods, and spoke over one another.

“Betrayer.”

“Deceiver.”

As though that was all that needed to be said, the Deceiver stepped from the bridge, and stood at ease, the way ahead clear. Passing close at hand, I took in more detail, observing the panoply of adornments covering that bizarre form. Grasping hands crossed with sigils and crests – with the dominant motif of a daemoniac fly. In silence we crossed, and travelled the Circle for some time before I dared disturb the hush.

“You serve the same master as the denizens of this plane, unless I miss my mark. Yet there was no love lost between the guardians of the bridge and yourself. Are daemons not the allies of Warriors?”

Moments passed in contemplation before the answer was given, during which time we passed a series of buildings. Each aspect of every structure seemed to reflect a different style of architecture, a cacophony of conflict which seemed ready to crumble any moment.

“You ask questions without simple answers, though it is right you should comprehend. You know of the value placed upon personal freedom by those who choose the Dark Gods. It is well known and why the Warriors will always find fertile ground among the oppressed and exploited. Among daemons, it seems autonomy is an accomplishment of the powerful, or perhaps a reward for the favoured.

“On the other hand, Warriors expect and earn that freedom from the very moment they swear, from their first steps on the Paths, while some daemons

will never know its sweet taste. Meanwhile, daemons already possess that for which Warriors strive: immortality and a place close to the gods. You might imagine those contrasts can rankle.”

The Betrayer considered for a long moment before continuing:

“Yet I serve the same master as that Deceiver. There is a commonality to our natures, and we may find ourselves parties to the same causes in the Mortal Realm. I even respect its prowess. I know that if we were to battle, it would find the best of my nature and turn it against me. The better I am, the better it becomes. Such a being is worthy of recognition.”

We continued in a contemplative silence, finally coming to behold one of the strangest sights

I would witness in my time here. It took long moments to process what I saw: oddly bifurcated forms gradually resolving into the shapes of people, split down the middle as though sundered by some wicked axe.

These were no corpses left for carrion – eyes blinked at me from each half of the bodies, and lips moved, seeming to form my name. I stepped closer, all the while trying to ignore the viscera of that terrible wound.

A croaking whisper greeted my ear, bubbling through welling blood.

“Beware... Those who would sow division in life... here find their sins visited upon them... Would that I had never...thought to breed discord between brothers... Forsake me now...but forget not...we live the Hell we make...”

Shuddering, I left the unfortunate soul behind me, but renewed my scrutiny of the Betrayer, wondering what had brought him to swear his soul to Kuulima. By our journey’s conclusion, I would know more of my enigmatic guide.



VI

Glory's End, the Lake of Blood, Banking on History

Gold and grandeur. Silver and splendour. Jewels and jubilation. It seemed all the glory in existence was on display in the Circle of Savar. A display to induce awe in any to behold it. Yet for all its imposing majesty, it struck a note beyond that of any throne room or treasury. More than just a display, it sought to overwhelm, to drown supplicants beneath its supremacy, to impress upon them their insignificance while instilling a longing to achieve some fragment of the same prestige.

In time, as eyes may adjust to the blackest night, I began to observe details missed at first glance. No palace's regalia ever conveyed the misery caused in its acquisition so plainly. Blood stained many of the gems, banners were torn as trophies from sacked foes, armour and helms were sundered by terrible blows. This was not pride earned, but pride taken, imposed upon a weak world.

The daemons here reflected the demeanour of their master, no less haughty than I would have expected. Our presence was beneath notice to them as we traversed their realm, mere insects upon the back of an indifferent beast. Unlike many of my other encounters in this alien world, their forms did not shift and blur. Self-assurance was evident in their unwavering shapes, topped by a crown upon each head, all kings in their own estimation.

In time we travelled deeper into Savar's lands, coming upon a great lake of black-red liquid that gave off a terrible heat. The bubbling surface was broken by a series of mounds. Stepping closer, they resolved into heads, barely visible through the steam, mouths twisted in silent agony. As I focused, I could identify their pointed ears, flowing hair and pale eyes, those fine cheekbones and pale skin distorted in pain.



Seeing my scrutiny, the Betrayer joined me by the side of the lagoon, sneering down at the scene before us.

"Once they saw their blood as a mark of their elevated status. I suspect the irony of their predicament is lost upon them, but Savar's humour is never for the benefit of the subject.



There are some among their number who even question that elves might be swayed. Foolishness. Every living creature has desires, and desire is the gate through which the Dark Gods enter."

Contemplating his words, I gave thought to the many souls of the Abyss. Certainly humanity has its place here. Yet for all the so-called Elder Races may speak of human weakness, no people are immune to promises of power. During my journey I would observe elves, along with dwarves, ogres, beasts, orcs and all manner of other creatures. Each had sworn to a Dark God, and upon their demise, the debt was collected.

Lost in thought as we walked, I almost failed to hear the soft whisper of my name. Looking around me, I stood in a forest of statues, each more exquisitely carved than the last. These were no flattering artist's portrayals; every flaw, every imperfection was perfectly rendered. I immediately recognised a familiar face - though not one I had ever thought to see embodied in marble. Glauco Carbo had been a banker from a lineage as old as Pontefreddo itself. His family laid claim to minting the first gold coin recognised and accepted across Vetia. Yet when the Carbo fortunes failed, and Glauco adulterated coins to maintain appearances, the discovery ruined their standing forever.

Studying the sculpture, it took long moments for me to grasp what was out of place. Only when they blinked did I see the eyes of the Glauco I had known, long years ago. From the open mouth of the effigy issued the soft voice I had heard before, barely audible, yet clearly imploring.

"Nazario... You walk freely, where I had not thought to see a familiar face... Please, does my family still hold office? Is my name still spoken? My coins, do they still pass from hand to hand?"

At my hesitation, his eyes widened - all the expression he could muster in his position.

"If you return, please, tell my kin I did all for them. Ask them to speak my name, that I might take my place in the Great Hall. I beg of you, do not let my name fade..."

With a crash, the statue toppled to the ground, under the influence of the armoured shoulder of the Betrayer. A cruel smile played across his face as he contemplated the erstwhile banker and his handiwork. Beckoning me forward, we continued toward the borders of Savar's Circle.



"Some souls retain a semblance of their dignity and identity here. Others, like that snivelling worm, are shadows. No wonder they failed the trials of a Warrior. Ascension awaits for those of iron will, and many who think themselves mighty are a single setback away from breaking."

I was left to contemplate the fall of a dynasty, and the question that played through my mind. What setbacks had the Betrayer suffered? What had led him to his station, to travel the Circles of the Abyss, where all seemed to know of him? He remained an enigma to me, yet one I determined to unlock.



VII

The Black Wind, Ice and Fire, Enticing Entrapment

Crossing the threshold of the Circle of Cibaresh plunged us into a darkness that enveloped and clung like satin. A black wind swirled around us, carrying groans of ecstasy and agony upon its gusts, together with a chill like the reaching hand of the grave.

Stumbling forward, we emerged from the murk into a landscape tinted in hues of purple and red. A haze lingered in the air; with every inhalation I felt light-headed, my mind swimming from thought to thought, until time appeared to bend and stretch.

In my stupor I found myself turning from the path, towards misty, half-seen figures deeper in the gloom. Contorting into bewildering and alluring shapes, they beckoned and taunted, ever beyond reach, yet always close enough to touch.

A semblance of reality returned in a flash of pain, as a cold steel gauntlet clamped on my shoulder. My plaintive fingers stretched out for one last chance to brush my vaporous suitors, but the Betrayer's grip wrenched me back. In time, we reached a place where the air cleared, and my focus returned as I was pushed against a frozen surface. My rescuer stepped back, shaking his head at my disorientation. Looking over my shoulder, his expression settled into a cruel smirk.

Turning, I scrambled to my feet as the chill object resolved itself into a block of ice, clear enough to make out naked bodies within. Each nude form was contorted in erotic positions, mere inches from touching one another, yet held in place, the heat of their passion eternally chilled. I knew,

without requiring evidence, that each soul was still conscious and aware of their predicament. I shuddered, both from the frigid air, and the agony of longing unfulfilled.

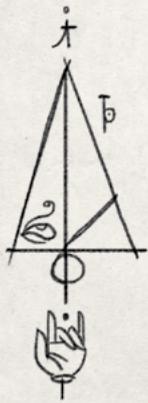
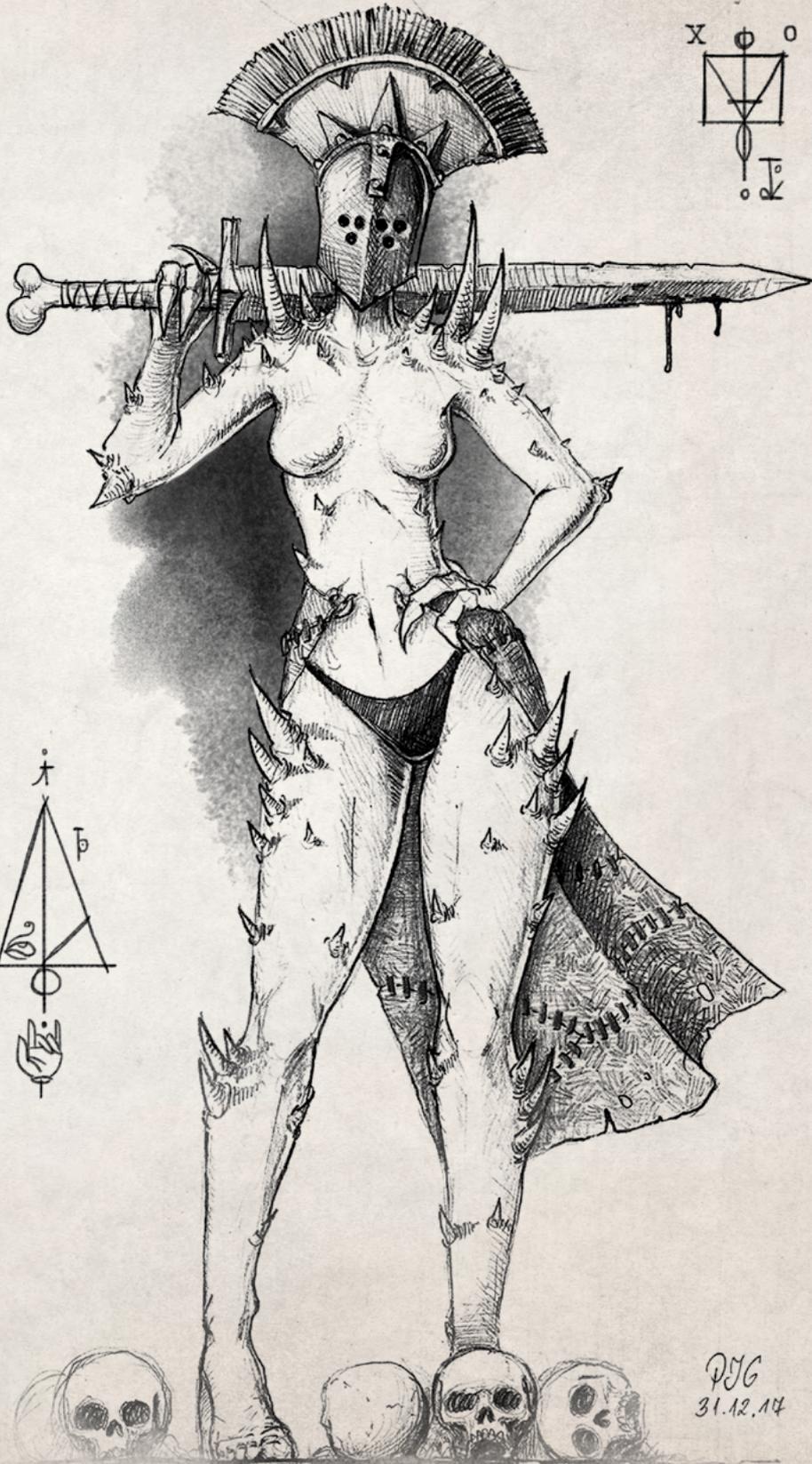
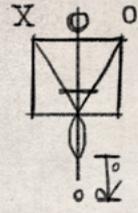
As we walked on through that heady sphere, I was confronted by endless tableaux of debauchery. Fornication in every imaginable combination, pain and pleasure on display, never one without the other. In the end, this heinous exhibition wore at my senses until I was numbed to the parade of endless flesh.

By the time we neared the outer reaches of this Circle, I felt intoxicated. My head swam, the path seemed to blur before my eyes. Never before had I felt so uncertain of the road ahead of me. Only as we finally escaped did my mind clear and clarity was restored.

Cibaresh does not present pleasure without purpose. Unto his domain are cast those whose commitment fails, those who lack the will to seize temptations set in their path and bend the world to their desires.

By crossing that plane of seduction, I had established, if only to myself, that I possessed a determination to see this journey to its end. Even now, I was not certain what that conclusion was likely to be, yet I knew with certainty that my time in the Immortal Realm was finite, and I would not overstay my welcome. I only hoped to bring back some fraction of the power surrounding me. Even the merest fragment could set me above all rivals.





DJG
31.12.14

VIII

The Way Barred, The Beacon Tower, The Mouths of Hell

Entering the Circle of Vanadra was akin to stepping within a furnace. The very air here stung the skin, and no matter how I turned, there was no relief. I felt my hands clench involuntarily, my jaw tensed, neck strained... The first stirring of movement behind me found me turning on the Betrayer, my hand raised in a fist.

He seemed taken aback for a long moment. Then he burst into roars of laughter, a harsh and grating sound, staggering as he clutched at his chest. He gasped for air, seemingly unaffected by the heat I couldn't escape, before eventually finding voice again:

"Who would have guessed, the milksop shows his teeth! I almost believed you might strike me... Still, I suppose I of all people should know not to believe anyone safe."

With that he trailed into silence, lost in a reverie, a distant look in his eyes. In that time I began to take in my surroundings - anything to avoid the ridicule of my guide. Far in the distance, to the extent such things could be judged, a tower stood tall, beacon fires blazing at its peak. And behind that tower, a shape moved. An impossible shape...

Without thought, my feet had begun upon the path that would take me to that enormous pinnacle. Gravel crunched beneath my feet, though I had never before seen pebbles of that sort: bleached off-white, smooth, yet with jagged fractures. Refusing to dwell on their origin, I resolved to fix my gaze upon my destination, allowing my feet to find their way.

I passed through an archway just as the sound of footsteps heralded the Betrayer catching up behind me. Had I been more aware of my surroundings, I might have observed the denizens of that place, manning the entrance of dark red stone. The clanging of metal striking the ground

spun me around, to find a portcullis of brass and iron blocking the gate. Beyond it, the Betrayer stood, his stance as impassive as ever. Yet his expression showed disdain, fury and something else...something that might have been alarm.

The next thing I saw, following the eyeline of my taciturn companion, were the beings manning the battlements of that wall. Impish creatures, with snarling faces and claws that left scores in the very stone, they growled and barked down at the Warrior below. Among their guttural vocalisations, I began to discern snatches of speech snarled between sharp teeth.

"Betrayer." "Faithless." "Rend you." "Vanadra have you." "Traitor." "Soon." "Give your soul." "Never leave." "Taste your treachery."

As their cries rose to a crescendo, they were joined on the walls by a more impressive being, a rippling mass of bronze, its movement reminding me of a great beast. As it approached the parapet, the lesser fiends fell silent, parting before it. It leapt from the heights, landing heavily on my side of the gate, facing up to the Betrayer. Its voice tolled like a bell, sonorous and echoing.

"You should not have come, traitor. You know the fate of your kind. Sooner or later, Vanadra always takes what is hers. The way forward is barred. The way back too. The Adversary has her due."

His words washed over the armoured figure, who stood, arms crossed, considering.

"Jorguuk, isn't it?" The Betrayer grinned as the daemon recoiled from the spoken name. "I never forget an aura. Let's be clear, I am here on the orders of the One above us both, above even your Mistress. Do you think I would come to this...pit... without great cause? Now, unbar my way, lest you cause her to lose favour."





I watched silently as Jorguuk's form shifted multiple times, each into a larger shape, hunching over: an armoured giant ready to charge. Just as I thought violence was inevitable, it relented. Without a word, its figure shifting back to its previous appearance, it galloped away into the distance. Above, the chittering fiends scattered in all directions, and we were alone once more.

Grunting sourly, my escort braced and heaved the portcullis upwards, and stepped beneath before it crashed down again.

"Reality may be shaped by will in this Realm, yet the mortal mind still sees and feels what it expects. Even after centuries of habituation. Someday, I will shape this place as the mightiest do. Perhaps a day soon."

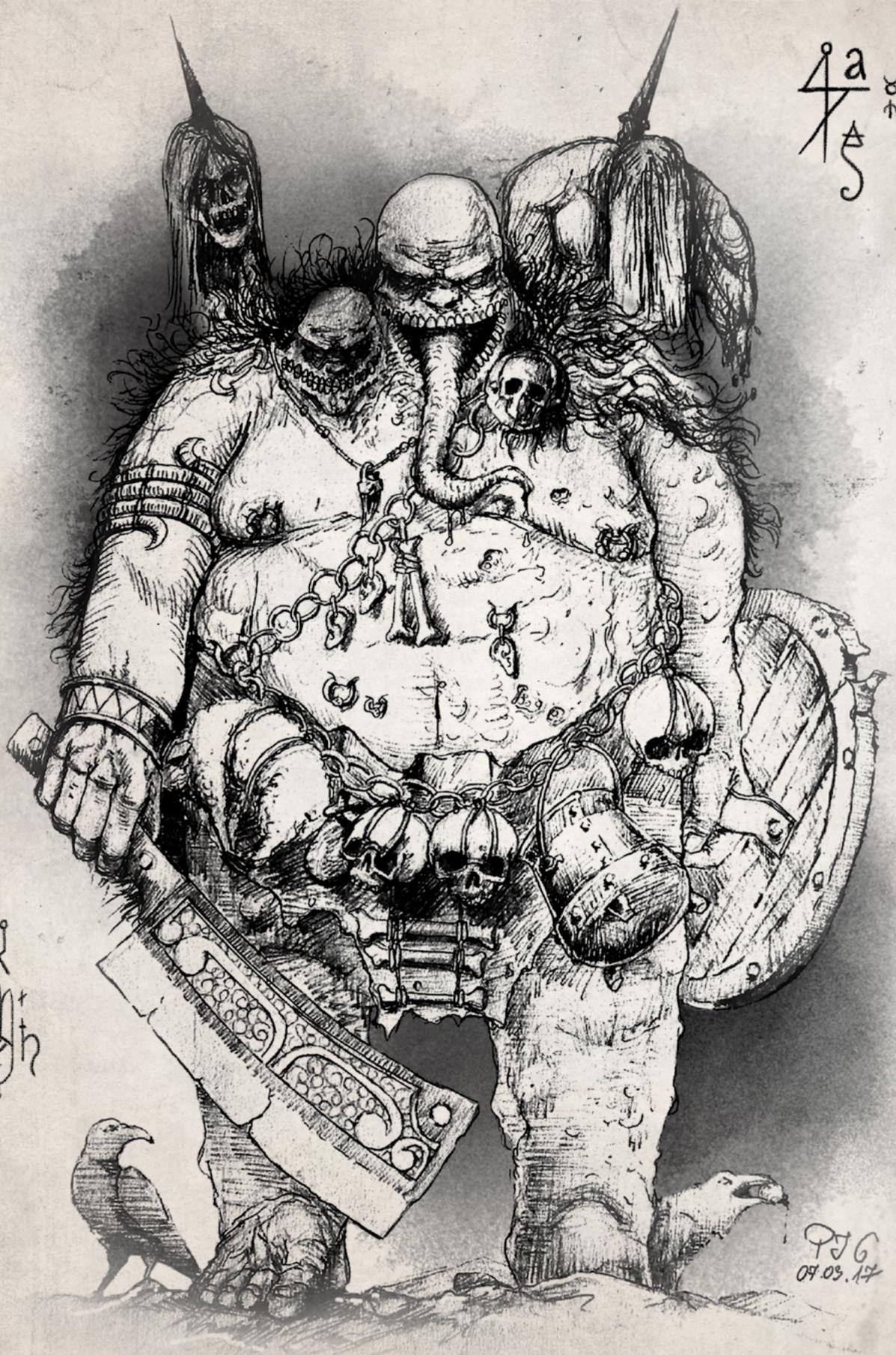
Beginning our journey once more, I continued to scrutinise the man alongside me. His bearing was that of a leader, a ruler - one who commanded respect. I struggled to equate this with his allegiance to Kuulima. What nature of person or being had this man to envy? Yet something had driven him to swear his oath, and align himself with the Lady of Flies. I felt my time to unpick the enigma was drawing short. He spoke once more:

"The Keep of Dal-Magoth - now we come to the end."

Like the intervening distance had disappeared, we stood before the

tower I had spied from afar. Around the walls of that mighty trunk of stone, Vanadra's fabled stronghold, a flight of stairs led upwards in a seemingly endless spiral. Yet I could barely spare a glance for a means of leaving, as my gaze was drawn inexorably to the shadow of a colossal shape, towering from the ground up into the gloom far above.





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PJG
04.03.17

I can recall little of that fearsome being now. As though I'd read an entire tome in an hour, or like holding water in my hands, the vision slips away even now. Size may not denote the potency of a daemon, yet to dominate a circle of Hell as this entity did was awe-inspiring. The merest hints of the point of a claw, the end of a spine perhaps belonging to a wing. More than this is beyond my mind, or perhaps beyond my sanity to recall.

Yet one detail is indelibly imprinted on my psyche. Three maws, side by side, gaping and inescapable. Vast, yet constricting. Within the two gullets on each end figures writhed. Whatever agony held them, it was without end or change, an interminable torment.



The central mouth was empty, a cavernous gaping abyss that called out for an occupant. As I eventually recovered myself, I became aware that I was not the only one transfixed by the scene before me. Beside me, the Betrayer stared, and upon his face was a dread of which I had not believed him capable. Genuine fear: something he saw there shook his normally towering confidence.

In that moment, all awareness directed at the behemoth before us, neither I nor my guide were sufficiently prescient to observe that we had been joined. When Jorguuk spoke, we each leapt to face him, the Betrayer's sword clearing his scabbard quick as thought.

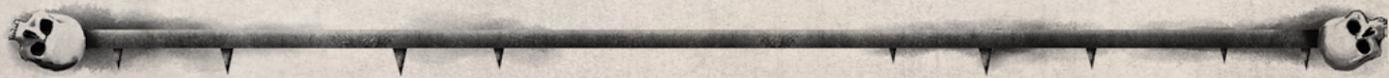
"You see it now, don't you? Your end? This whole place exists to punish the faithless, yet for those who betray their very people, a special fate lies in store. You recognise the others? There lies Pontifex Ursino Del Mastro, who opened the gates of Avras for Gaius Dexion. And there, on the other side: Sturd, the goblin chief who forsook the Great Orc in the Golden Age. But there's still room for you, the prize jewel to be collected.

"You are not sworn to Vanadra. But neither were those wretches. Once their debts were paid, and their masters claimed the souls - do you think any would deny my Lady her desire? The cost may have been high, but She places a premium on fabled traitors. Sooner or later, when death finds you, She will be waiting. And I will rejoice as She devours you!"

At long last, the spell broken, my companion roused himself, and sprang into action. Shoving me towards the stairs, he interposed himself in front of the bronzed daemon.

"I am not dead yet, Jorguuk. Others have tried for an Age to end me. They have failed. I intend my return to the Abyss in triumph. Judgement approaches, and it will not be you, nor your mistress, whose scrutiny I must bear. Now, tell your Lady that she shall not have me this day - and if I have my way, any day to come!"

With that, we were dashing up the stairs. Behind us, a great roar of outrage shook the stone underfoot, and I clapped hands to my ears to dull the pain which throbbed in my temples. Our pace did not slow, and for an interminable time, step after step was my only awareness. Eventually, a lightening of the air began to hint at an end of this long journey, and a return to a world I would never perceive the same again.



IX

Nazario returns to Vetia, the Betrayer unmasked

After an endless climb, I emerged upon the hillside where I had fallen asleep what seemed like a lifetime ago. Green meadow underfoot, clear blue sky above, cool wind on my cheek and the sound of birdsong in my ears, this was truly an idyllic place. Yet what struck me most was the sheer mundanity of the world around me. Beautiful yet predictable, vibrant yet somehow washed of colour. If I glanced away and looked back, things were as I had left them – nothing had shifted. Even the swaying blades of grass were a frozen tableau compared to the realm I had left behind.

Heavy footsteps to one side reminded me that I was not alone in the still landscape. The Betrayer glanced impassively at our surroundings, clearly unmoved by a transition he had made many times before. Still, he stood with his face uplifted, appearing to drink in the cool air. I expected him to abandon me immediately, yet he tarried. When he spoke, it was with a longing that surprised me, accustomed as I had become to his dispassion.

"Vetia. It has been long since I breathed her air. For centuries I have delayed my return to the land that exiled me. But the time of my testing draws close. For good or for ill, the world will remember my name. The Askar will remember their forebear. The Sunslayer will walk once more."

With that, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. I knew the identity of my guide, and the honour granted to me. In my mind I began to compose the many tales I would tell, with this text being the first. I felt the moment required some ritual.

"Betrayer, I thank you for your guidance on my journey. I understand now the path laid before me by the Father. I will spread the story of his magnificence, and draw others to swell his ranks.

Every soul dedicated to his cause will know of your legend. I wish you luck in the challenge ahead."

The Betrayer stared at me for a long moment, before a snort broke the stillness.

"Father save me from poets. Very well, Nazario. I wish you well too. Truthfully, I am surprised you survived the journey; you have proved you possess the will to thrive. Learn well the lessons of your journey and speak of the cause to those with the strength to hear."

With that, he strode away, and before he should have passed from sight, I could no longer see any trace.

I stirred myself, and prepared for the walk back to Pontefreddo. I had a purpose now, a cause to set myself to. I also had an ally, or at least an associate. When next you hear the Betrayer's name, expect it to accompany great events. The Father's trials are rarely trivial, and his will send ripples across our world.



