



BOOK ZERO OF INMANI



# UN / REMEMBERED

## CULLEN McHAEL

A CYBERPUNK FANTASY NOVELLA

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INMANI  
BOOK 0

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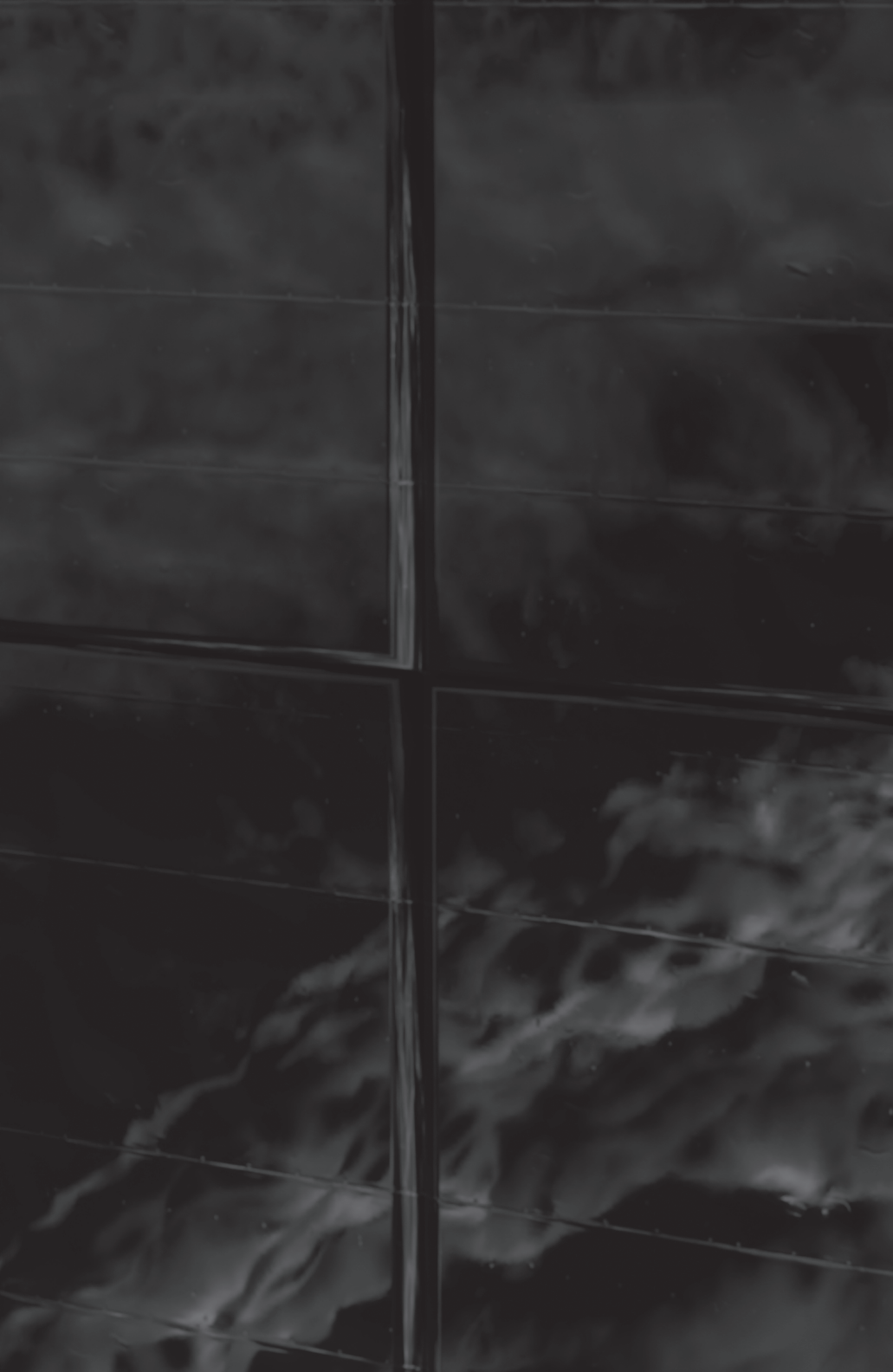
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*Bomb one enemy, make ten.*





## PROLOGUE

<<BEGIN AUDIO TRANSCRIPTION>>

INQUISITION: Subject description: Today the subject is 132 pounds—that's down three; still 5'4"; still presents female; still with unusually thick, black, and straight hair in a braid, though the braid is fraying.

SUBJECT: Untie my hands, and I'll redo my braid. We'll see how that goes for you.

INQ: Normal fraying only. Nothing unusual. Light scarring on the nose, cheeks, ears, and chin. Extensive scarring on the stomach and lower back. The scars have not changed. Would you state your cover name for the record?

SUB: Still Maxine Ali; it hasn't changed either.

INQ: Subject is encrypted as Red Mercury. Do you know why you're here?

SUB: You gonna ask me that every single day? I gotta make up a new answer? At first, I thought it was something to do with the bounty, but now I'm starting to think you just want a nice lady to explain why your religion died. Are you sad your religion died? I get it. I've been there. It's okay to feel sad, but we channel our sadness in constructive ways shefwayla? We don't kidnap people and tie them to chairs surrounded by bombs and freaky magic glyphs. That's not a healthy way to feel sad, friendo.

INQ: How are you feeling today?

SUB: Hungry. Tired of getting fed through a tube. Your room service sucks.

INQ: Freeing your hands would require trust, and we don't trust each other yet. But we could. Why don't we start today in Behalo.

SUB: Oh shit. He's doing it. He's asking the big questions. Sure you don't want to call in some backup?

INQ: You said you were looking forward to telling me about Behalo, that you were there when it happened. Behalo is listed as your place of enlistment. That's where you signed up?

SUB: Behalo is the city where no one remembers my name. What is there to say? You saw the vids. You think about it often.

INQ: The memory link is forming. Images look good. You skipped dinner that evening. Tell me, what spices did they use in the Behalo street food?

SUB: No idea. It's eggs mostly. Eggs, olives, and spices. The spices burn so good, and with little flecks of melted goat cheese wrapped in teff-paper. I'm crying. Scribe, you got me crying. Smells like smoked peppers...paprika maybe? Smells like home. Fuck. I'm not a chef.

INQ: You're lost in thought.

SUB: I carry the name of Behalo. It would be right to speak it to you, Yohannes, even if you weren't holding a blade above my neck.

INQ: Please don't call me that. Where were you when it started?

SUB: When it...started? Ah. Of course. That's what everybody wants to know. We can tell that story. Ironically, my thoughts were all about paladins.

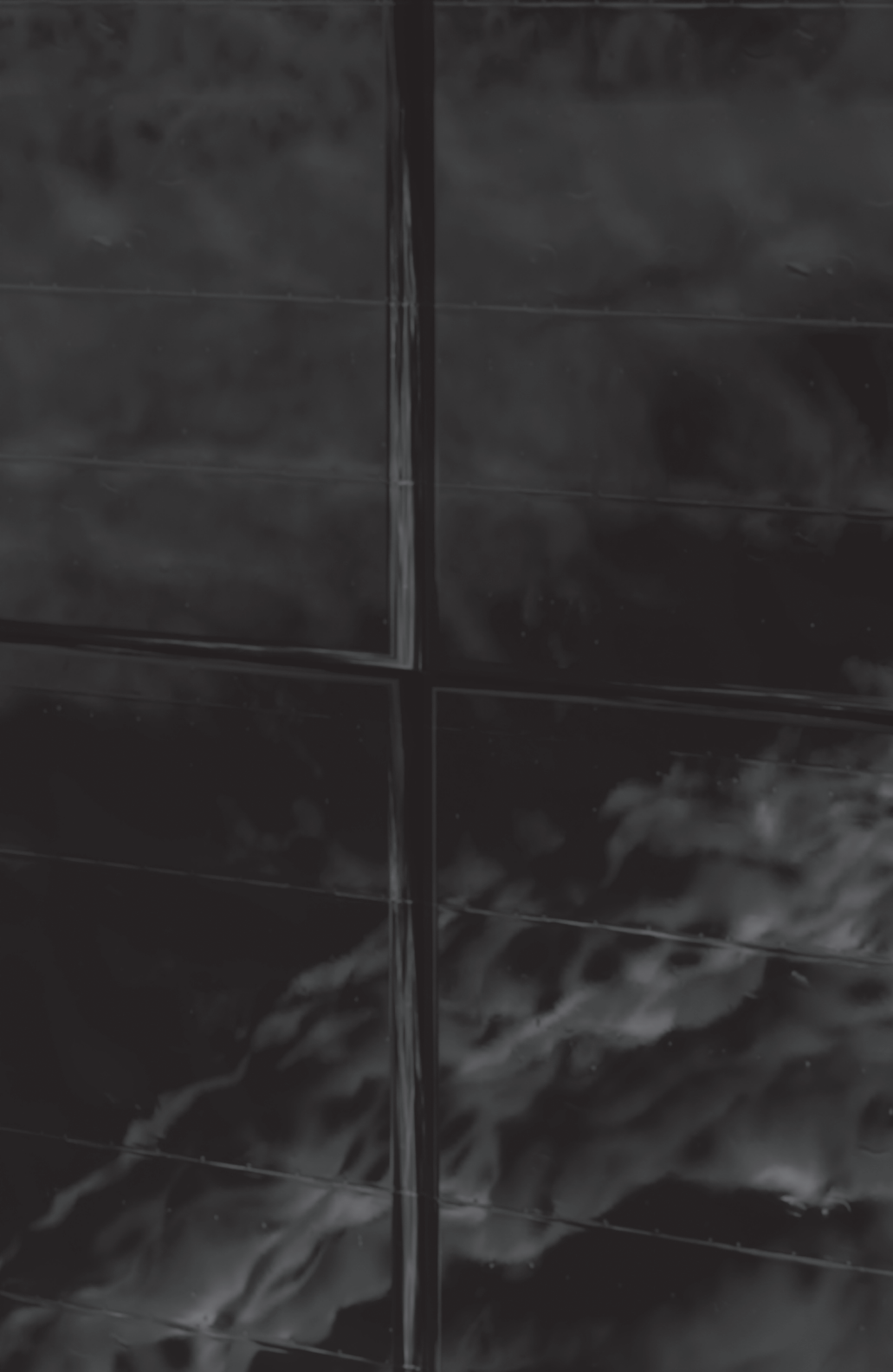
INQ: Paladin. Never paladins. A Knight Paladin of a Church of the Divine Form is colloquially called a paladin. The plural of knight paladin is knights paladin, which may also be shortened to paladin.


SUB: Wow neat. It turns out having my grammar corrected while I'm arguing for my right to live is my kink. Do it again.

INQ: Alright. Fine. The link is strong, and I can see you just remembered...remembered tearing somebody's heart out of their chest...[clears throat]...so the link is strong. Let's...let's begin. You were thinking about paladin?

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CHAPTER 1  
**BEHALO, SOUTHERN  
CONTINENT, FOURTH  
PLANET OF THE  
ANDRASTAE SYSTEM.  
WINTER, YEAR 587  
AFTER THE AYU**

I CAUGHT SIGHT OF A LONE HUMAN FIGURE FLOATING, SILHOUETTED against night clouds lit orange by the city below. A paladin. Ocean winds moved the smoke-ghosts of fireworks around and past him, but he remained. He was probably the one called Wrathful since Behalo, the city of white walls, the city by the sea, had only one paladin left alive.

Gunshots from the outer walls and prayer song from the inner streets provided a sound track. I watched and wondered idly how it would feel to fly.

I'd been scraping by in Behalo for a year, where scraping meant sifting the market gutters for funerary treasures, skinning my knees on the bark of orange trees for food, sweeping wrecked buildings for useful junk, and sometimes wiping the blood and dust of my friends' bodies off my skin. The scrap was abundant; we were under siege. High explosive made just one of several kinds of evening rain.

"Paladin be up in it," I whispered to Estropo, but he responded with a snore. "He have a little party maybe." My mutter did nothing to reduce the apprehension that seemed to crawl between my shoulder blades, so I added: "Best be ready to dance."

A sudden blinding shimmer of airburst artillery shrouded the

paladin in smoke. He'd drifted too far past the walls and come into range of inmani guns. A worrisome dance beat but too far away to need to party.

*Maybe it would be nice to rise like a shell into smoke, to rise with each year a little higher, like growing up to where the shells can't climb. Thirteen years and none have hit me yet. That's worth celebrating, I guess, if I can make it to tomorrow.*

It would be my birthday when the sun rose. The guns gave bad presents. Their noise rattled the walls.

Estropo didn't seem to care. He could sleep on a wasp nest and not wake up.

Ocean-brined wind passed through the broken glass in my window, over my arms, and past my face, delivering the smells of fish, fried eggs, and high explosive. All three scents influenced the churn of my empty stomach.

The paladin emerged unscathed from the storm of air-burst explosive, then drifted down into smoke and shadow.

I snuggled a little deeper under my pile of newspaper and turned my attention to an ant on the windowsill. She didn't seem to care about the evening chill, and if she had an empty stomach then it didn't seem to bother her. She was female, like me, as all worker ants were. I also knew that worker ants didn't live longer than two years. This one was dark, like me; small, like me; and mighty, like me.

It was important to know things about ants, because some of the tunneling inmani soldiers who lived beneath the city and treated it like their livestock pen had been engineered from ants and still used the same smells and pheromones. Ants would detect those monsters long before I could. When ants went wild in their zigzag and chaos, it was party time.

*Ants live only a couple of years. So, who dies first, little sister? You, or me? You get two birthdays. Maybe I'll get two more.*

This ant examined the crystal edges of fragments of glass glittering on the concrete sill with mute curiosity. Examined, discarded, examined, searching, perhaps, for sugar.

My hands flexed under the fading tension from a long, dangerous day of examining, discarding, examining, a dozen holes—holes in the ground, in walls, in roofs—searching for unexploded bombs. It had been a hard day, but a rich reward.

“Hey, Estropo.” I nudged the still form next to me. “What’s our sugar?”

“Huh? You want sugar?” He woke up and his voice broke with excitement in the space of one breath. His stretch made his shoulders pop, and the light glisten from the metal of his left arm.

“Gross!” I shoved him, and he swayed away but caught my hand and held on as if I might anchor him. “We got a bomb, yeah?” I pointed to the rucksack by my knee. The explosive inside had come from a half-buried missile in the basement of what had once been a school. Church soldiers would pay good coin and use the bomb to collapse an inmani tunnel. Inmani militia would pay in medicine or prosthetics worth far more than the church coins, but going to them was always a risk. Either way, it smelled like chemicals and profit. “Whatya want to do with your cut? Maybe something fun?”

Estropo leaned back. A white scar over his lips made his thin face seem dark. He never smiled, but his eyes shone as they searched my expression, lingering on my too big nose, and then checked to make sure my braid was still tied. “You wake me up for that? Dang! I’m gonna wake you up for nothin, see how you like it.”

“What do you want to do with your cut?” I repeated, as his cold fingers traced my palm.

He turned his serious gaze to the bag. “First thing, buy some food. Maybe you want some better clothes? Buy you something nice from Tiergo’s, or hit up one of those fancy lady shops with dresses and shit.”

I pulled my hand from his. A gust from the window cooled my heated cheeks. “I don’t want no lady clothes, Estropo. What’s wrong with you? Tiergo’s? Really? Food, sure. Then get a house, maybe? Someplace we don’t sleep under paper and glass.”

"What's the point of a house? Paladin just knock it down. Or inmani. Anybody, really. We living in a great big 'knocking down people's houses' party."

"Shefwayla," I agreed, using the one word prayer that essentially meant *I accept this*.

A steady moan from high above our concrete roof sounded like a church gunship at low altitude.

Conversation ceased. Estropo popped open a black canister hanging around his neck, letting out a ray of gold light. We waited. We watched his light outline pits in the concrete and shimmer over glass dust. It shone bright and steady even as he passed his prosthetic hand over it.

The engines groaned closer. High-frequency vibrations scratched at our ears and made the glass shards in the windowsill sing. The tone seemed to caress the roof.

Estropo shone the light on his shoes, checking that his shoelaces were tied. It flickered, and my heart thumped hard enough to hurt. I clenched my fists and whispered, "Idiot. You took that sludge?"

"Better than an infection," he whispered back. "Better than a hole in my foot. Light still shines for me still, hey. Still got my soul." But the prayer for light scribed on his little cylinder flickered as its radiance touched the medicine in his body, medicine taken from the inmani encircling our city. The gods would not grant their light to fall on forbidden bioscience like an antibiotic.

If real inmani came nearby, soldier-grade inmani, the light glyph would go out.

"Don't want to party in the dark," I whispered. "You should have told me you were gonna use it."

Estropo winced an apology, and held the light out in his metal arm, so its light steadied.

Some poor fool shot at the gunboat—rapid pops from a gas-powered rifle. The gunboat's answer sounded like tearing cardboard and felt like an earthquake. For an instant, reflected light

from the beamer made all the glass shine. A gust of hot wind followed, then the waterfall sound of a collapsing building.

The ant froze on the sill, antenna retracted and legs curled tight. I leaned close to the broken glass to keep a lookout.

A group of church soldiers passed quickly down the alley below our window, following behind the gunboat. Their boots rattled a web of iron rebar where the alley pavement hadn't been poured. One tripped and cursed. The rebar clanged. Everyone froze.

"Contact left," said one in a wry tone that sounded far too loud. "Helsinki found his other left foot."

A ripple of amusement spread between them. Church glyphs on pendants glowed white in contrast with the yellow electric lights on their rifles. The faint white of the church magic illuminated ragged, mismatched clothing, scarred limbs, and dirty weapons. We hadn't much left for them to steal, but if they caught us with the bomb, they might think we planned to use it.

The gunboat moved away, seeking its inhuman prey. The echoes of its engines chased it from alley to alley, and the soldiers followed in ragged single file.

The ant wandered around the sill. It didn't look panicked.

A deep breath stirred my still lungs like the opening of a door into desert rain. My guts and fingers unclenched.

At last, I said: "You know when your birthday is?"

Estropo shook his head.

So, I tried: "You know how old you are?"

My friend puffed out his chest. "Old enough."

"Old enough for what?" The smell of fried eggs evoked home. So did the smell of gun smoke. "I sure aren't old enough. Don't think nobody old enough."

*I'll be thirteen in a few hours. Estropo be probably about two years older.*

My birthday present lay in the rucksack: six kilos of leaky bomb stuff stinking up my one good bag.

Six kilos of bomb. Ideally, nobody would send any more bombs our way.

The ant made its way down the wall and toward my rucksack. It paused at the edge of the oozing canvas, deliberating in its anty brain about whether to leave the concrete and enter the strange new land of chemicals and fabric.

The ant reached its conclusion and started toward the gap in the rucksack zipper.

I killed it.

"Sorry," I whispered as I cleaned my stinging hand on a newspaper. The ant could not have set off the explosive. Guilt seeped through my guts. "Sorry."

Estropo traced his metal fingers down my back as he said: "Why you askin' how old I am suddenly?"

The light from his canister flickered.

"We old enough," he tried to brag, but his voice broke. "Do whatever we want. Make ourselves a life. Get married maybe!"

I should have laughed but it made my stomach squirm when he got like that. "Hey shush," was all I could manage, even as the little light captured my full attention.

"Good is right!" Estropo growled. "Be the baddest fam in this—"

I had to clap my hand over his mouth to shut him up.

His little church light shimmered, making the shadows of wadded paper dance like living things. It wasn't pointed at Estropo. The sudden intake of his breath cooled the sweat on my covering palm.

We waited that way, watching the light struggle.

At last I made a decision, and announced, "Shit."

Our bag full of explosives fell against my shoulder as I rose to a crouch. Estropo swiped his church-light canister and slung its loop around his neck. "Your lace!" He whispered, pointing to my foot, where a shoelace had come untied.

"Shefwayla!"

Bomb goop from the rucksack damped the strip of skin between my pants and shirt as I bent forward to fix the knot.

"Maybe they hunt the gunboat?" Estropo moved to the room center, dividing his attention between the windows, the door, and his little canister of dying light.

Dozens of ants darted about among the garbage. Hundreds. One crossed my hand. A bat squeaked in the eaves. The church gunboat had gone too far to hear.

A flash of movement like a bird passed our windows, but too big. I squinted. Not a bird—a huge, four-legged creature on the roof next door. *Inmani!* I didn't linger to watch, but added a second layer to the knot on my shoelace, just in case.

Gunfire erupted a block away. Too intense to be a skirmish. *An ambush!* Estropo's eyes answered mine, thinking the same thing: *Those church soldiers we just saw, they be in it now, they be playing the dying game.*

Out loud, he whispered, with a twist of bitter anger: "Party on."

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## CHAPTER 2

# CAGE APARTMENTS, 2 AM

PANICKED ANTS CLIMBED BOTH MY LEGS IN A TICKLING TIDE, PANICKED at the weapons-grade monsters surrounding our desperate shelter. Rocketfire made the angry music of a major encroachment. Maybe the biggest yet. Maybe too big to survive. With monsters outside, somebody might gift us a missile too.

*Nah saints, it's my birthday tomorrow! I've got to make it to thirteen.*

"Hall!" I hissed and ran for the door.

"Roof!" Estropo gasped, going for the window.

The door had no latch. Its bottom scraped an arch in caked dirt as I yanked it open.

Past that door, church lights still shone in a row along the fractured ceiling, pale silver and brilliant despite the absence of electricity. They illuminated bare concrete walls pitted with blast marks and punctuated with open doorways stretching forty paces to an intersection congested with fallen plaster and rubble. Halfway down the hall, the cracked mouth of a bomb crater opened to the floors above. That was the way out: past the intersection, left to the stairs or right to the fire escape, either meant escape.

A beggar girl sat in the hall beneath a church light that stut-

tered in protest of her mismatched cat's eyes and one cat-like paw. She clutched a blue infant to her too-thin chest. Those inmani eyes saw me, knew me, and understood what was coming. "Sirrai? Do the walls stand?" she called while gathering herself.

I took my first step toward them, opening my mouth to answer.

At the intersection, a church light went out. Not a flicker or a fade, but a dead stop. Like the power of the gods illuminating that glyph had just up and ghosted. Only one thing could kill a church light like that.

As shadows ate the way out, Estropo's hand clapped over my mouth. His arm caught around my hip, and his heartbeat pulsed in his fingertips.

Guns opened up throughout the city, both near and far. It wasn't just the soldiers we'd seen. Guns everywhere. But nobody in my building. Nobody to help me.

A long black limb probed out from the dark at the end of the hall, from the intersection, from the way out. A giant, spear-tipped antenna seemed to feel blindly in the air, but that living blade had hairs along its length and a set of fingers tasting the air beneath its sharp end. The next church light protested in a flicker and then died as that limb came under it. Deep in the dark, a stripe of neon pink outlined a single human-like head with half a dozen shining blue eyes.

The beggar girl sat petrified as one light then the next blinked out above the reaching limb, bringing the dark toward her.

"Run, Shani!" My cry was muffled by Estropo's hand, but it broke the grip of terror on the girl, even as it turned the monster's six blue eyes toward us.

Shani's legs could barely lift the starved husk of her body. A wordless cry fled her lips but the infant in her arms made no sound at all. In the church light, her eyes blazed gold, the skin of her arms and legs amber, and the filthy blue of her shirt bloomed a red flower as the spear antenna struck through her heart.

As her legs began to fold, a second inmani limb joined the first. Her child slipped from her arms, but the light above went out before either hit the ground.

Estropo pulled me back into our room. As he shoved the door closed, the dark advanced down the hall, killing light after light like a rush of flooding water.

Broken glass crunched under my shoes as I scrambled to the open window. The next roof would be a hard jump. Not the ideal escape route, but we had judged it possible. You always scout the outs.

But, that way lurked more inmani-shaped problems.

Behind me, Estropo jammed the door shut with rebar and splintered wood. Someone farther down the hall cut loose with a torrent of panicked pistol fire.

At the window I hesitated, looking out to the neighboring roof opposite the alley and hoping the inmani there had moved on. It hadn't. A painful gasp filled my chest as I took in the details of what stood there on the roof—a creature like a headless horse, with long-fingered human hands coiled to fists. The proportions of its body clawed at my mind. It seemed impossible for such a thing to move of its own will. Limbs could not bend that way or muscles clench, and still it seemed to breathe through its body in undulating waves. Its haunches shed tiny moving things like leaves, crawling out from it across the roof, a spreading circle of writhing little creatures. The weight of its inhuman regard lay on the distant gunboat through two praying mantis eyes.

I ducked behind the windowsill. With eyes squeezed tight, I threw a hurried prayer to my mother's Ayu, Yamarasu, a goddess of snipers, secrets, death, and the space between the stars. *Yamarasu who waits in the dark, I name you. Let my feet find the hidden path that leads to the corner of the eye and around the bend. I hope that means escape. Please help us escape.*

The whites of Estropo's eyes matched the scar on his lips as he crouched beside me. His gaze twitched from window to door. The

church light in his hand was just a cylinder, as dark as the thing outside.

Many small feet pattered past the jammed door. Then more. Feet crossed our roof like a small landslide. The door next to ours opened with a groan and crash.

Estropo summarized the situation in a trembling singsong: "We choose the wrong place to sleep."

"It's my birthday tomorrow," I declared.

"Listen to the shooting. The walls are down. They're all up in the city."

"Estropo!"

"Some kind of new weapon, you figure? Guess they don't wanna buy our bomb."

I grabbed his face, and his eyes focused on me. "It's my birthday, and I wanna live."

He winked. "Shefwayla."

The bag on my back held both our bomb stuff and the tools we used to harvest it. I took a few seconds to tinker, and then slung it over my shoulder. Estropo perched on the window sill, where the ant had stood. I told him: "Thirty seconds."

A blow on our door sprayed splinters across the room.

"Should 'a bought me those inmani rabbit legs," said Estropo, then he jumped hard to the right out the window. I heard but didn't see his hands catch the gutter pipe there. It wrenched with a sound like an opening tin can. He started down.

A second blow blasted the door off its hinges, scattering rebar and wood wedges. The door spun in the air and slapped the opposite wall with a wind that whipped my hair around me.

I jumped out the window with the sense of spear hands chasing me. Airborn. Three-story drop to the concrete and rebar mesh of an unfinished alley—a six-pace gap to the opposite roof, where a creature out of nightmare whipped its green eyes toward me.

I spun hard right, turning my feet to torque my hands toward the gutter. My fingers closed on rusted steel. The momentum

whipped me around, slammed me into concrete, and knocked my grip off the gutter. I grasped air.

Free fall.

Estropo caught my rucksack so its strap snapped tight across my body, swinging me hard into the wall with a crack that took my breath away. The gutter groaned, then gave. It sprang from the wall, bending out into the alley.

Long spider legs reached for us from out the window, getting farther away.

Estropo lost his grip. A wall passed like a train.

I landed on a spider web of steel rebar. Bars bruised my chest, hip, and thighs. My cheek kissed rust with a blossom of hard pain. A jangling cacophony of bar rattling on bar echoed up and down the alley.

Estropo's cry was sharp and brief, followed by a whimper: "Help! Help me!"

I pried my body from the web of steel. My ribs felt like broken glass and fire, and my hair seemed to have matted itself into a sight-blocking rug, but all my limbs worked.

Estropo lay with one leg splayed over the unfinished lip of the foundation. A spike of metal punctured that leg, pointing toward the stars.

Far beyond Estropo, past the edge of the alley, the cityscape of Behalo spread downhill over the bowl of the bay and uphill again to the terraced reservoirs, the boulevards lined with orchards, the layered buildings built into the hills all flickering with fires and smoke. The view of the city ended where white walls bordered outer darkness. Distant over that glowing horizon, the church gunboat floated like a storm. Its weapon made the clouds flash as it clawed a new scar in the battleground of Behalo, and that weapon's light shone onto Estropo's blood, red and thick, and on his thigh bone bent into a V over concrete.

Crawling shadows spread down the wall to my right. Above them, the green eyes of the horse-like creature peered down at us.

Estropo clutched at my arm as I crouched by him.

“Pull me off it,” his plea came too loud. “Pull me off it, okay? Don’t leave me.”

“Twenty-two seconds,” I chanted. “Let go of my hand.”

My hair blocked my eyes. The shadows crawling down the wall seemed to chitter—a sound that almost made words in a language I didn’t know. Over that sound came a growing chorus of alarm and courage, the cries of Behalo, but muted, clenched, like the city was a body caught in the desperate breathlessness of a knife wound. My hair smelled of masonry dust and cordite.

I turned my back on the distant gunboat to brace my foot, curled both hands in the cloth of Estropo’s pant leg, and lifted hard.

His scream wounded my ears.

Muscles strained. Bruises burned. The cloth tore.

Estropo grabbed my wrist. “Stop!”

Something heavy landed behind us, sending the jingle of the rebar web rattling from every wall.

“Run,” pleaded my friend. “Shefwayla, shefwayla. Leave me the bomb. I hold it close as you yeah? Give them a reason to remember my name.”

I stepped over Estropo and turned around to face what had followed us. The bomb slid off my shoulder. I caught its strap in my hand.

*Mother, I hope you were right about Yamarasu. If she remembers your name, then I will not be the last.*

The monster from the hall had followed us. It stood up from where it had landed, blocking the alley mouth and silhouetted against distant flickering clouds and the red streaks of rockets beyond the alley end. Its torso and head looked human, but its arms and legs split at the ends and folded on themselves many times to where hooked claws met the walls and ground. Six eyes flashed on a bald head.

The other inmani, the horse thing on the roof, poured its crawling shadow toward us and down the wall. A third set of glowing eyes watched from a gaping window nearby.

A red flare shot into the sky from around the bend, out of sight at the mouth of the alley, and a voice I recognized but couldn't place, perhaps someone from the market, shouted in sharp alarm: "Oriens! Oriens! Oriens!" A word I didn't know.

The cry spread. Familiar voices. Locals.

The one before me turned to look over its shoulder at the distant gunboat.

"Shefwayla," pleaded Estropo. *I accept this.* "Shefwayla, run!"

I spun the rucksack on its strap, building momentum for a throw. The whoosh of the pack passing my ear sent a shiver through me. When I tried to answer Estropo, all that came out was a sob.

The crawling shadow on the wall spoke with a voice like sandpaper on silk. "Smell a bomb. She has a bomb."

The one in the window peered out. "Armed?"

"You bet," I bragged as I fought to keep my bladder from voiding. I refused to look away, but I couldn't see a mouth. It seemed to form words with the vibration of its arms.

Another flare went up from the street near Dak the tailor's shop, as far away as a hard ten-second run.

"We don't want any trouble," Estropo held up both hands, palms out. "Let us go, and we'll run. We want to sell the bomb. We're not here to interfere with whatever you've got going. You want to buy a bomb?"

I said: "If you're going to kill us anyway, we might as well set it off. Ten seconds."

The creature cocked its head. Its many branching limbs curled as if in thought. It said, as if to the one on the roof: "Does the knight come? Is the trap set?"

And then I understood. I understood these creatures were not hunting militia. As the city heaved under an assault fit to end her, as the guns on the walls chattered and the sky flickered, these monsters had chosen our alley to lay a trap for Behalo's one paladin.

*Bad luck.*

The crawling shadow down the alley wall spoke in ten thousand hissing voices like insect wings. "We are ready. He will die."

My shoulder burned with fatigue. I let the pack stop spinning. As it came to rest beneath my arm, the gunboat wheeled about and turned its nose toward us.

"Run," begged Estropo.

Past him, past the monster, at the mouth of the alley, red flashlights approached. Their light touched the tag we had scrawled there, our tag, that made it our place, a place that we had scouted, that we knew was safe. The tag was just a butterfly in chalk. It was probably why Shani had slept in the hall.

Shani had known my name. Estropo too. Dak the Tailor had probably sent up the flare. Even the paladin was on his way.

*Into a trap.*

The inmanus shivered its whole body, then spat. Something like wet mud hit my elbow and arm, splattering across the bag, the bomb, and me.

*Yamarasu take my name.*

The creature in the window also spat, but I stumbled backward to dodge. The ball of spit passed before me, trailing wet streamers. Estropo screamed as he flung his church light. The little cylinder was harmless, just metal. It wouldn't even glow with inmani nearby, but the thing before us caught it and wasted a moment directing it into an open window, as if it had been a grenade.

I landed on my ass. *My sister's sweat in my nose as she swept my foot. We tumbled back. Close bodies. Muscles straining. Mother's scolding command: "Sprawl! Don't let her past your guard!"*

I hit and rolled, just as Mother taught me. The spit on the bag began to harden, but greasy bomb goo kept me moving. I peeled the bomb from my armpit and set it spinning again, looking for somewhere to throw it, to make a distraction, to maybe escape.

Defiance tore from Estropo's throat in a harsh cry. The monster rocked back. For a moment, just his courage seemed a weapon against it.

Then, one inmani limb uncurled to press its claw through Estropo's body like a fingernail through a zit. The hook at its end came out of his upper right shoulder.

Estropo's cry ended.

I stopped retreating. As the flashlights approached the alley, and the gunship came low over the city, I looked up, and knew what to do.

The monster did not expect to be hit with a rucksack. I got in one solid whomp with a splash of goop.

One clawed hand hooked like lightning, and *Mother's fist flashed at my eyes, but my wrist guided it aside*. A spiked limb lanced at my gut, and *Mother's spinning practice sword thrust and lunged in steady advance as I ducked, retreated, dove, and evaded*. The green eyes glowed, and *my sister's eyes laughed as she caught my counterattack in a casual parry*. Hooked claws passed through the flesh of my stomach and out my back. The tearing of my skin stung. A sudden flood of wet like cramping filled my insides as the hair of that limb scraped the skin of my belly and the torn flesh beside my spine. I marveled at these sensations for only a moment before a second spike passed between my ribs and out my back, then curled around me.

The inhuman thing lifted me from my feet.

I hit it with the rucksack. The bundle bounced off its chest, smearing bomb goop, but the pack spun and struck again and again with all the strength my mother gave me, all the days of fighting for scraps among bombed out cars and in empty homes, the bodies, the broken bells. Every trick and hope poured down my arms and into the spinning bag that struck and struck with all the effect of swearing at a stone.

The intake of my breath broke against the hairy spear through my chest and could advance no further. My strength failed.

A many-jointed arm caught the pack. The cloth tore. Blue bomb-stuff sprayed all around us, and tools clattered through the unfinished foundation.

The six-eyed face turned toward its companion in the building, and it said: "Just propellant. Not a bomb."

*Two seconds.*

From the dark at the alley mouth, a light bloomed, bright and searing. A human figure floated there, wielding a blazing rod bright as the sun. *Paladin!*

The thing holding me whipped its attention toward the light. Crawling shadows flaked off the wall like peeling paint in a mighty wind. High above, on the roof, the horse thing keened a note like a steel cable about to break.

*One second. Take my name Yamarasu.*

I covered my eyes. In the dark I saw again my mother's face and heard her raise the songs of her goddess to the night.

From inside the bag, my watch alarm chirped, and its battery, rigged to fine copper wire, sparked. Fire erupted through the cloth. It wasn't the explosion I wanted, but a flower of blue heat sprang from the bag; unfolded itself in the dark and dust; and coiled across my belly, hip, and back in a rush of light and agony.

Even as it enveloped me, the same fire covered my enemy, spread in its hair and into everyplace the bag had struck, where it blazed brighter than those strange eyes.

The limbs pulled from me, scattering strands of my belly across the metal and sand. A tearing silk scream chased me as I fell.

The inmanus thrashed, tossing the web of iron rebar. Its blazing windmill of arms rolled over Estropo and toward the alley mouth, straight to the paladin's feet.

Thunder struck it there. Steam and dust billowed out from the paladin's blow, and bits of inmanus scattered across the walls.

I pressed my forehead to the rebar, laughing in hysterical agony as light danced about me. In the places where the rucksack had laid against bare skin, my flesh bubbled into vapor. I watched the right half of my stomach cook away, baring rib bone, torn bowels, and blackening hip bone.

It seemed to me that I was luminous, more than flesh, more


than earth. As my body dissolved before my eyes, I knew that I would not die.

Something cold wrapped about my neck and the fire went out at once. The agony retreated. The steam of cooked meat stung my eyes.

Mercy is dark.

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## CHAPTER 3

# CHURCH ARMY

## HOSPITAL TENT, 5 AM

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*"It is the fate of all bodies to become the stars. Our stuff was made in them, and to them we will return. But with the blessing of the Ayu, I ascend the path of remembering, and know not just my momentary arrangement, but also the light I was and the light I will be."*

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—TAMALIK, *THE BOOK OF THE SEEDS*

Pink predawn light oozed from the window flaps of the hospital tent when the man in armor came to see me.

I lay in sweat-soaked bandages and a meal-sack turned hospital gown, aching, alone, and too weak to move—a pile of rags with two awkward elbows and two nude knees.

The man wore armor like a garden of moss. In his green and seeming living garment, I could see neither chink nor joint, nor anything reflected. Tiny flames hissed at his shoulders and heels, but he made no other sound as he floated down rows of stinking cots, past the groaning forms of the injured and dying like a

shadow over leaves. Then the flames died, and his feet sank to the floor.

Easily five hundred tortured bodies shared my sweat in that place, shared my stink, shared the agony of defeat and of injury. Some horrible inmani poison had been unleashed in the streets, and dozens who had caught only the faintest touch of it lay convulsing in their beds. Yet, of the hundred cots in that vaulted canvas hell, the man in armor landed next to mine.

His helmet clicked then hissed as he removed it. The head under the mask was bald, dark skinned, weathered, and unshaven. He did not smile. His deep voice sounded like the wake of a cargo ship. "Who are your people?"

I had not spoken in the few hours since Estropo died, and my voice would not crawl out of its hole. Only after he put another healing prayer on me, after the glyphs on that strip of cloth faded and stole away my pain, my cramps, and my sweaty itching, only then did I manage a torn whisper: "Behalo."

"You are of Behalo?"

The sack the nuns had dressed me in seemed too small and too big at the same time. I felt ashamed of my wrecked body and bare legs, of my bandages and pain. I tried to curl my knees to my chest, but this stretched the new skin grown by prayer power and spread more sickly agony through my fragile body. Even as I twisted in helpless pain, I felt more naked than before.

He repeated his question. I tried to convey that I came from the mountains above the city.

"What was your village called?"

"Home."

"Why did you leave?"

"Bombs."

"You have people in Behalo?"

"Some." *Dak, the tailor; Samara, who I met on the road from the mountains and who bought scrap on market street; Alain, whose shrapnel wound took away his voice and mind but not his love of dancing; Shalik, who traded bread for spent bullet shells; Hoset, the water*

*carrier*. There were many. None belonged to me, but they knew my name. I couldn't speak theirs in a throat torn from thirst and pain, but I felt them about my body like a blanket of memory and longed for them.

He sighed and then hung his helmet from his belt. "My name is Knight Paladin Aquila the Wrathful, Garnet of the order of Tamilik the Gardner. Do you know what a knight paladin is?"

I nodded. Paladin Knights of the Church. Worshipped. Hated. Feared. Invincible.

*Everybody knows that.*

"Will you fight with me?" His voice rolled over me, and I didn't understand. Slowly, the question seeped into my mind like water into dry earth. I understood the words, but not why he gave them to me—spit and bones, worthless me. Alone and unwanted.

The flames had cooked away the better part of my kidneys, seared my guts and vital organs, and scarred my hip and ribs to the bone. I lived only because of the prayers the nuns used as bandages, which conveyed the healing blessings of the Ayu called Omidada the Maker, of the Many Hands, Whose Name Means Union. Omidada the Weaver of Destinies, the Gift Giver, had given me the birthday gift of a few sleepless hours waiting for my last sunrise in a body of cooked strings and salt. Even my sweat ached.

I couldn't talk, so I just lay still and looked up at the paladin named Wrathful. His armor smelled of desert wildflowers.

He seemed to understand my unspoken question and constructed an answer as if building it from the loose parts of his deepest thoughts: "Last night, Mort came to Behalo. His inmani overran Behalo's defenses. Her altars were broken, her walls cast down, and our soldiers forced from the city. A new doctrine demands absolute retribution for this action against us, and I must comply. I need a few like you to carry the names of Behalo, to remember her as I remember her, and to be the hand of her vengeance when the day comes to speak her name. The thing you faced was an Oriens, one of Mort's fiercest creations. You failed in

your fight, and I failed in my mine to defend the city. But we survived, and here we are. Your courage may be rewarded if you choose to join us."

I didn't understand, but I nodded anyway. The movement made my world spin and stomach knot.

He went on: "What I offer is a privilege available to few, but it will not be easy. You will be trained and tested. If you live and serve well, then perhaps in the final hour you will leave the world a better place. Perhaps the Ayu will see your worth and lift you to their arms in the sky. You will have a greater hope of that than most."

"A paladin?" I croaked. "Me?"

"Someday, perhaps. More likely, you will become a scribe, soldier, or priest in one of the Ayu orders, as befits your capability, but all service is sacred. Will you leave your name in Behalo and go nameless to Aphelon to be made anew? Will you commit yourself, mind and body, to ending the inmani menace that has scarred you, overrun Behalo, and cast this dark shadow over these six hundred years of troubles?"

*To join the church...that would mean becoming the one who drops the bombs.*

I didn't want to bomb anyone. I couldn't think of how to answer. I knew that the Ayu hated inmani, and their church hunted them, always. Shani had been inmani. Dak was too. Estropo might have become one, if he'd lived another day. I didn't hate them. Finally, in a voice of absolute desolation, like a fool, like a child, I said: "It's my birthday."

Growing sunlight seemed unable to affect the faintly luminescent green that was Wrathful's armor. The helmet hung from his belt with his weapons. In the featureless mask, I imagined my face reflected.

He waited. A paladin. One of a few in the world. My mother's songs echoed in my head, of warriors who could break armies, overturn countries, and soar through the sky in impenetrable armor. Here was such a one. Waiting. For me.

His respectful silence was a sort of kindness I had not felt since my sister and our white-walled house came apart in a blast of dust and shattered bells.

So, I said yes. Yes, to the chance to try to become a paladin. Yes, to serve my mother's goddess. Yes, I would climb this ladder of the church, on my way out of dust, out of the reach of the guns.

Knight Paladin Aquila the Wrathful drew a vial from his armor and wet his thumb with its contents: "You must swear."

I nodded.

"Then repeat, and do not misspeak."

I repeated his words in a voice like a breeze at a broken windowpane. I spoke slowly. It took some time.

"My blood, and ten thousand years: My blood for the ten thousand years of the Ayu's reign, may it come again."

"My sweat, and ten thousand years: My sweat, for the ten thousand years of a perfect world lost, to be built again."

"My hate, and six hundred years: My hate for the inmani, who defied our gods, and damned us all to this time of troubles."

"My purpose and tomorrow: My purpose to purge the world of inmani, so that tomorrow the Ayu may come again."

"My death and eternity: My death for the death of inmani, that in their annihilation, I regain immortality."

I spoke those words, and on my tongue they seemed to be only breath and the vibration of a dry and swollen throat. Nothing more. The oath felt dead to me. It did not move my heart.

Then the paladin smudged a glyph of silver ink on my forehead. He turned my face up toward him and seemed to wait. I could not think of anything to say or do except to voice the one-word prayer: "Shefwayla."

At that sound, a jolt of electric power arched through me, rushed down my forehead and past my lips, rushed through my lungs, guts, bone, and muscle as well as into every toe and fingernail. I felt that power open something in my body like a bubble containing a vast space and another universe, or a thousand

bubbles, a million, so the walls of a bubbling cosmos formed every cell of me.

Seared into my mind was the sure knowledge that while “Shefwayla” sometimes meant *I accept what I cannot change*, in this case it meant *I accept responsibility*.

The paladin looked down at the shuddering wreck of my meat and bone.

“You have sworn,” he said. “So be it. Come, Nameless. Your first duty must be to bear witness to the horror we will inflict on our enemy.”

He lifted me, blankets and all. It hurt to be moved, but then his thrusters fired, and I learned for the first time the joy of weightless flight. My stomach dropped, but my heart soared. My hair drifted in a cloud, and my fingers clutched at the metal arms, but I turned my face into the wind and even though my body hurt, I laughed.

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## CHAPTER 4

# TEAGOR MOUNTAIN, DAWN



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*Axis of the Divine Form*

Noun.

1. *The symbol of the Church of the Divine Form—sexless human silhouette with limbs spread inside a circle and square.*
  2. *The forces and countries in support of the Church of the Divine Form during The Great War. Sometimes shortened to “Axis.” Also “Church Bloc.”*
  3. *The philosophical idea that all decisions must take into consideration the purity of the human body according to the commandments of the Church of the Divine Form. E.G., “All actions revolve around the axis of the divine form.”*
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AQUILA THE WRATHFUL LANDED ON A STONE NEAR THE PEAK OF Teagor Mountain, opposite the city from the shimmering sea. The frigid air above the city and the bitter wind at the hilltop turned my lips blue, and I wanted to melt into my blankets until nothing remained of me but wool, but I could not tear my eyes from what remained of Behalo.

My shelter, my comfort, lay with its white walls all kicked asunder like broken teeth, its streets hazed with smoke and dust,

its prayer songs broken and faint, accompanied by only gun shots and the chorus of separate and desperate cries reduced by distance and wind to a dissolute keening. One detail stood out: a new flag, flying over the city center: it bore the sign of a blue arrow pointing up. That was the sign of Mort, the inmani general.

My contemplation ended when Wrathful set me down and my weight returned, bringing with it vertigo and the feverish exhaustion of my injuries.

I clung to Wrathful's knee. His armor felt firm as steel, and the touch made no sound, but his visor turned to me. "Will you teach me?" I begged. "I want to fight."

He turned away. His voice through the helmet's speakers came without distortion, despite the wind, as he said: "Our wartime central authority, the Inquisition, is taking recruits, and I will send you to them."

Then he departed, lifting free of my grasp and accelerating back toward the city below. When his shield left me, the wind struck hard and cold.

Other refugees waited like stones on the ridge, each alone with their thoughts. They looked like me—ragged, harrowed by a lost battle—though not as severely injured. When I had regained some of my composure, a man with one eye raised a rag-wrapped hand and offered me the traditional Behalo morning greeting with a bitter twist to his lips: "Do the walls still stand?"

I gave the habitual reply in a broken voice that couldn't reach him through the whistle of wind: "One more day." But it was not so.

The one-eyed man studied my face a moment, then he shuffled a little closer. His clothes were the silk robes of a tailor, blue and green, elegantly cut, and covered in masonry dust that billowed from him in the gusting mountain wind. He ducked his head toward me and, in a confiding old voice gruff with emotion, said: "Every day I have joked. They ask, do the walls stand? And I would say out there, always!" He waved at the city, "In here?" He waved at his chest.

"The walls could use a beer, or some sleep, or it's been three days since the walls let me poop." He shook his head. "Today.... Do the walls stand? Out there, no. But in here..." He tapped his chest with one trembling finger, and his voice broke as tears carved drip marks in the dust on his face. "In here, always. Always."

Behalo looked like a boot print on an anthill, bustling with motion and ruin. The stranger waited for a reply, and when I gave none, he turned away, shuffling as if carrying a terrible load. I remained, watching the raw wound of Behalo, listening for the sounds of broken bells, and watching Mort's flag flap in the ocean breeze.

A second paladin drifted up to our ridge, thrusters flaring against the gusting wind, carrying another person. Where Wrathful's armor looked like rough emerald in the golden sunrise, the newcomer's kit glittered with the inlay of silver lilies and roses, as if the Ayu-forged metal were living flowers, rustling in a clear current of water. The flowered knight landed atop a spire of rock where their passenger lowered his feet, wobbled a little, and then carefully sat down.

Then that paladin leapt from the rock, so the fires of their jets could propel them back toward the city. A black sword appeared in their left hand as if from the air, and some kind of gun was held ready in their right.

We waited. We watched more armored knights rise from the city below on their too-small thrusters, their shields like soap bubbles on the wind. I had never heard of so many in the same place. Over thirty. I could not have named so many if given a day to scour my memory for every song and legend. Every suit of armor was unique, and they dazzled like a garden of metal art where each work was made by a different mind, but each one slightly mad in its own way.

With each trip, they brought passengers and deposited them at the hilltop. The fall of Behalo became more real with each new face. I recognized no one, and none of them seemed to wear the

same mark on their forehead that Wrathful had placed on mine. As the number grew, I felt more and more alone.

Far below, the city's last corners and strongholds popped with the discordant rhythm of bombs and falling buildings: the failing heartbeat of a once mighty organism. More and more the paladins arrived from the city without passengers, but instead drenched in blood and dust.

There were about five hundred refugees when Wrathful returned a final time, empty-handed. He settled by my shoulder, and several other paladin came close to touch him.

The one in the flowered armor rose into the air and, floating with the city behind them, removed their helmet. Golden hair spilled from beneath the rose helm, but the skin of the woman under that shell was darker than mine. She nodded gravely to the many weary faces watching her. "I greet you in your hour of loss! I am Knight Paladin Shaun the Summerfire, Scepter of the Inquisition and Herald to Benedict the Goodfather." She kissed her wrist, and her smile shone like the walls once had. The smile faded, and she turned to look down to the city below. "I swear to you that you and I will prevent this fate where we can. Let it never befall any other place that humans call home. Shefwayla."

"Shefwayla." I replied, but my voice did not carry.

A moment later, she spoke again, sounding like an actor on a stage, a little overwrought. "We are the forty paladin of Benedict's Fist, one from each of the forty chapters of the United Church of the Divine Form, fighting together under Benedict's banner, the banner of the Inquisition." She let those words simmer through her audience.

That there were forty chapters of the Ayu churches was news to me. I had thought there were hundreds of Ayu, each with their own followers united only by the agreement that the human form was divine and therefore a hate for inmani who defiled that form. It seemed reasonable that the number of churches must have diminished in the long war with the inmani, but I'd never had to reconcile my belief that there were hundreds

of churches, each with its own order of paladin, with my belief that there were fewer than a hundred paladin. Those things couldn't both be true. I began to wonder how many paladin still lived, where they all were, and what exactly they were capable of.

*Forty*, replied my own brain promptly, *they are right here, and we will soon find out.*

*At least forty*, I corrected myself, *she said there was one from each surviving order, but some orders might have more than one paladin.*

I searched among them for any who might serve my mother's Ayu, the Lady of the Long Night, but if their outfits were meant to signify their Ayu, then I didn't understand the language. It was only then that I saw the news cameras floating about. Little glass orbs with little glass eyes. One stared at me. When I tried to cover my knees, it drifted closer. I turned my face away.

"Here he comes," said the paladin next to Wrathful, pointing high in the sky.

A constellation of falling stars passed over the dawn to curve toward us.

Summerfire pointed as well, but her voice was gauged to carry. "Look and see Benedict the Goodfather!"

The lights slowed over the city, and all but one broke away.

"The inmani factories in the catacombs will be destroyed," whispered the paladin beside Wrathful, in a consolatory tone. "Inmani of over forty kinds are made here, breed here."

"I would have rooted them out, in time." The green-armored Wrathful wore a face like basalt, and his eyes were an amber capture of regret.

"No, I'm sorry, but you lost Behalo when Mort came here. We can't stay, and you can't hold it without us. We would have marked this place your grave."

The distant figure of Benedict the Goodfather, high in Behalo's sky, did not shine, but seemed to drink in the light. It was too far to see clearly, but it seemed like a human wrapped in shadows beyond the edges of its armor. It seemed larger than the others. It

seemed as though the clouds drifted toward it, as if the winds changed to draw all dust that way.

Summerfire's voice competed with the huge and endless wind: "This is the ultimatum of Benedict the Goodfather, Supreme Allied Commander of the United Church, Lord High Inquisitor, Hand of Yoanos, and Warden of the Fourth: Any who harm the United Church shall be wholly destroyed. We answer any attack with unsparing wrath."

At the last word, my gaze turned to the paladin called Wrathful, and I saw him sigh. His words to the knight next to him were not meant to carry: "I will have to change my name."

Utter foreboding settled on me as the floating cameras all drifted into the protection of a nearby Paladin's shield. Those eyes continued their intrusive regard of us, of our pain, even as most of them turned to study distant Benedict.

Inmani prefer the night, so the rising sun usually brought relief from fear. Instead, the sunlight drowning Behalo's broken white walls and pressing through her shattered streets seemed violent, its shadows wounds, its purpose suspect and strange.

Alone and unmoving among pillared clouds, Benedict looked fragile, despite his armor and the ominous immensity of his presence. I worried for him, the leader of the faction I had so newly sworn too.

A missile lanced toward him from the city below, riding a jet of spiraling smoke from someplace very near Mort's flag. Its lightless detonation thundered enough to thump my chest. For a moment, a fine haze haloed the inquisition leader, curled about him, and then drifted away. If the weapon did him any harm, it was not evident.

Then he replied. A black sun shone from his body. The earth split. The white walls turned to dust. The hills melted, and their caves were filled.

The paladin of Benedict's Fist stood beside us, each sheltering a huddle of refugees in the bubble of their shield as aftershocks spread.

I imagined watching a rind of some thick fruit, full of seeds and worms, blasted apart in a microwave. Or maybe like watching an anthill under a river of molten steel. The earth boiled and sank under the terrible power pouring from that lone figure. Shatter lines spread up the mountainside. My mind grasped for things it was like, trying to substitute ants or worms for the too-human shapes tumbling from fragmented buildings as they soared into the air on plumes of burning dust.

But I could find no analog to the sounds, particularly of the sea, first as it protested its meeting with the black light in rippling detonations of steam, then, as the earth cracked and sank, the sound the ocean made pouring into the screaming pit where once had been half a million lives. To call it a sound was wrong, like saying a fire when you mean a star. It was more—a presence in the bones, ears, teeth, and earth that howled in every degree and shook everything that should not shake.

We watched a long while. The wind turned hot and foul. The earth around us smoked. The sea boiled and spat, steamed, and settled. Slowly, the sun forced its beams through a seething sky as the weather turned around us, uncertain how to respond.

Aquila wept. There was wailing. Cries pitiful and stifled. I thought of Yamarasu who waits in the long night and takes all names.

*Is this what you want, Goddess of Death?*

In a shaking voice that hardened with each word, Summerfire called: "Behold the end of war! Behold the end of our enemies! Behold the dawn of a new day of peace, the Pax Benedictus!"

Behind her, a dozen church transports descended through the haze, engines flaming, their gates open to take us away.

She called again, "Remember Behalo to any who would make themselves our enemy. Let them know that what they take from us, they cannot keep, where they hide they will be found, where they run they will not escape. Any who attack the united churches will be wholly destroyed. Thus we will come to them, always, and the peace of the Pax Benedictus shall not end."

Benedict never moved, but beneath him Behalo had changed to an alien place of glass, steam, and fire. No sign remained of the city of white walls, the city by the sea, and no one who remembered my name.

*Is it enough? Will this end it?* Peace settled across the cracking plain, but it seemed like a peace in the vacuum of space: hostile and empty.

Wrathful answered my thoughts, though I hadn't meant to speak them: "Inmani cannot surrender."

I felt my whole soul as a candle flame in the wind when I asked: "This won't make them? Surely they'll give up? They'll run away?"

The eyes of Aquila the Wrathful offered no answer but grief.

Clouds thickened about Benedict the Black, Benedict the Unmoving, Benedict the Unstoppable. I watched until he vanished from view.

Then I boarded a church ship, to go learn to be a soldier.

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## EPILOGUE

INQ: DO YOU RESENT WHAT BENEDICT DID? IT WOULD BE UNDERSTANDABLE.

SUB: Sure. More regret than resentment. Honestly, it doesn't concern me.

INQ: That was a lie.

SUB: The future is bigger than the past.

INQ: Also a lie. It was a righteous death. Behalo died so that a peace could be born. The Pax Benedictus—

SUB: Never existed. There was no Pax Benedictus. Come on, buying your own propaganda? The dying never stopped. It never even slowed down.

INQ: When did you begin to feel that way?

SUB: Aww Saints...not until much later. After Nova Mundo. It's a different story.

INQ: Shefwayla. Alright. I thank you for your memory, for speaking the name of Behalo to me.

SUB: I mean, I didn't. I didn't speak its name. You asked about death, about the final hours. Do you think that's what defines Behalo? What defines me? Did you hear the answers to your questions about why I ended up tied to this chair? Because I resent Benedict the Goodfather?

INQ: It does seem that way.

SUB: Behalo is the city of the Hall of the Seeds, of the Festival of Tamalik, of the Verdigrant Scribes, of the Feast of Orban in the springtime, where the boulevard of cork oaks once ran beside Saint Meersi's River and filled the air with the smells of dancing water and wood, where artisans made a particular style of hurdy-gurdy, only to be played when the first or third moons were full, where they grew the forgotten spices that made the eggs perfect. All of that be gone. It is the city where my name was forgotten, ground with the river and the white walls into the sea, into dust, into nothing. But they rebuilt it. Like all the cities lost to war. Even Old Paolo, which they bombed with poison gas, is back, bustling, alive. Behalo's name waited in the wind, and when the ground was still hot, they put shovel to dirt to start building again. One day, maybe you go there, scribe. Maybe you see the memorial of half a million, and breathe there the dust, and then learn why what Benedict did can never be forgiven. Resent Benedict? Resent is the shimmering candle flame at the edge of a solar flare ejected from the supernova that is my hatred for Benedict the Black, for Mort, and for all who apologize for the likes of them, but I did not bring Behalo back from the wind. My hate does not sustain it. There is no one there who knows my name.

INQ: Then, I suppose it is my duty to simply end you. Perhaps I should just push this button and end your life? If you're my sworn enemy, if you can't be dissuaded, then why wait?

SUB: Go ahead. Be like Benedict.

INQ: Give me a reason not to?

SUB: You want to know how we got inside Aphelon; you want to know if there's some way to undo everything we've accomplished; and you really want to know what can be done about that nagging voice you got in the back of your head, the one wondering if maybe Benedict was wrong all along. Good news for all of us: I have those answers.

INQ: Alright. Here we are. You're still alive. You're right about this much at least: There is a terrible question before us, a question that can only be answered by you. Are you a hero or a villain?

SUB: Buddy.... if you find out, you let me know.

INQ: Let's start small. Tell me who your contact was at Aphelon, and I'll synthesize some Behalese street food for you. It won't be perfect, but it will be close.

SUB: Sinéad Delgado.

INQ: The cardinal's daughter?

SUB: You said that wrong. The smoking-hot, bitch-grade motherfucker of a trash fire paladin, diplomat, thief, and cosmic-grade asshole, who yes, was also Cardinal Delgado's daughter. Get it right.

INQ: Interesting. She might be difficult to track down.

SUB: You said eggs?

INQ: I did. I did.... I'll get you your eggs.

SUB: Look at us, trusting each other.

INQ: One more thing.... No, never mind.

SUB: What is it, Scribe? Are you an inquisitor or an awkward date? Ask.

INQ: What's your name? Your true name?

SUB: Interesting. In all the time I worked for the Inquisition, nobody ever asked. Suddenly you want to know? Here's what I got to say to you, Scribe: I've worn the cover name Maxine Ali; it started as a lie, and then it became who I am. I'm encrypted as Red Mercury. Been called a few other things. You want to know the name my mother gave me, the name my sister used, you bring Benedict in here. I'll tell him. Otherwise, I think you're going to have to go ask around in Behalo.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, I'm Cullen McHael (they/them). I write fiction about heroic figures tackling complex problems with wit, good intentions, and bloody knuckles. I live in a spooky house with two cats, some bats, and a lot of squirrels, amid crop circles carved into the vast cornfields of the American midwest, where the stars shine a little too brightly.

At various times I've lived in a monastery, taught at a university (ten years!), been a journalist (ongoing), made documentary films for various non-profit orgs, turned flips as a circus acrobat (long ago), and stared at the sea as a spotter at a lighthouse. I never earned a black belt in karate, kickboxing, or judo, but I did earn quite a few black eyes.

Let's connect! Visit [CullenMcHael.com/links](http://CullenMcHael.com/links) for socials.

This story is fiction, but street kids, refugees, and child soldiers are real. Charities of choice:

Assata's Daughters

Hogares Claret

Lighthouse Relief

A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book is donated to these causes.



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