MIDNIGHT SERVICES HAD once been crowded at the Church of the Lightning Stone. Fear of the darkness had drawn people in search of sanctuary in a way the daylight could not. For as long as anyone could remember, the dark had been a time of blood, a time when raiders attacked, monstrous engines descended on wings of fire and the violence of the warlike thunder giants was fiercest.

Uriah Olathaire remembered seeing an army of those giants as it marched to battle, when he had been little more than a child. Though seven decades had passed since then, Uriah could picture them as though it were yesterday: towering brutes who carried swords of caged lightning and were clad in plumed helmets and burnished plate the colour of a winter sunset.

But most of all, he remembered the terrible magnificence of their awesome, unstoppable power.

Nations and rulers had been swept away in the dreadful wars these giants made, entire armies drowned in blood as they clashed in battles the likes of which had not been seen since the earliest ages of the world.

Now the fighting was over, the grand architect of this last world war emerging from the host of toppled despots, ethnarchs and tyrants to stand triumphant on a world made barren by conflict.

An end to war should have been a wondrous thing, but the thought gave Uriah no comfort as he shuffled along the nave of his empty church. He carried a flickering taper, the small flame wavering in the cold wind sighing through the cracks in the stonework and the ancient timbers of the great doors to the narthex.

Yes, the midnight service had once been popular, but few now dared come to his church, such was the ridicule and scorn heaped upon them. Changed days from the beginning of the war, when fearful people had sought comfort in his promises of a benign divinity watching over them.

He held his gnarled claw of a hand around the fragile flame as he made his way towards the altar, fearful that this last illumination would be snuffed out if his concentration slipped even a little bit. Lightning flashed outside, imparting a momentary electric glow to the stained-glass windows of the church. Uriah wondered if any of his last remaining parishioners would brave the storm to pray and sing with

him.

The cold slipped invisibly into his bones like an unwelcome guest and he felt something singular about this night, as though something of great import were happening, but he couldn’t grasp it. He shook off the sensation as he reached the altar and ascended the five steps.

At the centre of the altar sat a broken timepiece of tarnished bronze with a cracked glass face, and a thick, leather-bound book surrounded by six unlit candles. Uriah carefully applied the taper to each candle, gradually bringing forth a welcome light to the church.

Aside from the magnificence of the ceiling, the interior of his church was relatively plain and in no way exceptional: a long nave flanked by simple timber pews and which was crossed by a transept that led to a curtained-off chancel. Upper cloisters could be reached via stairs in the north and south transepts, and a wide narthex provided a gallery prior to a visitor entering the church itself.

As the light grew, Uriah smiled with grim humour as the light shone upon the ebony face of the bronze timepiece. Though the glass face was cracked, the delicate hands were unscathed, fashioned from gold with inlaid mother-of-pearl. The clock’s internal mechanisms were visible through a glass window near its base, toothed cogs that never turned and copper pendulums that never swung.

Uriah had travelled the globe extensively as a feckless youth, and had stolen the clock from an eccentric craftsman who lived in a silver palace in the mountains of Europa. The palace had been filled with thousands of bizarre timepieces, but it was gone now, destroyed in one of the many battles that swept across the continent as grand armies fought without care for the wondrous things lost in their violent spasms of war.

Uriah suspected the clock was perhaps the last of its kind, much like his church.

As he had fled the palace of time, the craftsman had cursed Uriah from a high window, screaming that the clock was counting down to doomsday and would chime when the last days of mankind’s existence were at hand. Uriah had laughed off the man’s ravings and presented the clock to his bemused father as a gift. But after the blood and fire of Gaduare, Uriah had retrieved the clock from the ruins of his family home and brought it to the church.

The clock had made no sound since that day, yet Uriah still dreaded hearing its chimes.

He blew out the taper and placed it in a shallow bowl at the front of the altar and sighed, resting his hand on the soft leather of the book’s cover. As always, the

presence of the book was a comfort and Uriah wondered what was keeping the few faithful that remained in the town below from his doors this night. True, his church stood at the summit of a high, flat-topped mountain that was difficult to climb, but that never usually stopped his dwindling congregation from coming.

In ages past, the mountain had been the tallest peak upon a storm-lashed island shrouded in mists and linked to the mainland by a sleek bridge of silver, but ancient, apocalyptic wars had boiled away many of the oceans, and the island was now simply a rocky promontory jutting from a land that was said to have once ruled the world.

In truth, the church's very isolation was likely all that had allowed it to weather the storm of so-called reason sweeping the globe at the behest of its new master.

Uriah ran a hand over his hairless scalp, feeling the dry, mottled texture of his skin and the long scar that ran from behind his ear to the nape of his neck. He turned towards the doors of his church as he heard noises from outside, the tramp of feet and the sound of voices.

'About time,' he said, looking back at the clock and its immobile hands. It was two minutes to midnight.

THE GRAND DOORS of the narthex opened wide and a cold wind eagerly slipped inside, whipping over the neat rows of pews and disturbing the dusty silk and velvet banners that hung from the upper cloisters. The ever-present rain fell in soaking sheets beyond the doors and a crack of lightning blistered the night sky alongside a peal of thunder.

Uriah squinted and pulled his silk chasuble around him to keep the cold from his arthritic bones. A hooded figure was silhouetted in the doorway to the narthex, tall and swathed in a long cloak of scarlet. Uriah could see the orange glow of burning brands carried by a host of shadowy figures who stood behind him in the rain. He squinted at these figures, but his aged eyes could make out no detail beyond firelight glittering on metal.

Displaced mercenaries looking for plunder?

Or something else entirely…

The hooded figure stepped into the church and turned to shut the doors behind him. His movements were unhurried and respectful, the doors closed softly and with care.

'Welcome to the Church of the Lightning Stone,' said Uriah, as the stranger turned towards him. 'I was about to begin the midnight service. Would you and your friends wish to join me?'

‘No,’ said the man, pulling back his hood to reveal a stern, but not unkind face – a remarkably unremarkable face that seemed at odds with his martial bearing. ‘They would not.’

The man’s skin was leathery and tanned from a life spent outdoors, his hair dark and pulled back into a short scalp-lock.

‘That is a shame,’ said Uriah. ‘My midnight service is considered quite popular in these parts. Are you sure they won’t come in?’

‘I’m sure,’ repeated the man. ‘They are quite content without.’

‘Without what?’ quipped Uriah, and the man smiled.

‘It is rare to find a man like you with a sense of humour. I have found that most of your kind are dour and leaden-hearted men.’

‘My kind?’

‘Priests,’ said the man, almost spitting the word as though its very syllables were a poison to him.

‘Then I fear you have met only the wrong kind,’ said Uriah.

‘Is there a right kind?’

‘Of course,’ said Uriah. ‘Though given the times we live in, it would be hard for any servant of the divine to be of good cheer.’

‘Very true,’ said the man as he moved slowly down the aisle, running his hands over the timber of each pew as he passed. Uriah walked stiffly from the altar to approach the man, feeling his pulse quicken as he sensed a tangible threat lurking just beneath the newcomer’s placid exterior, like a rabid dog on a slowly fraying rope.

This was a man of violence, and though Uriah felt no threat from him, he knew there was something dangerous about him. Uriah fixed a smile and extended his hand, saying, ‘I am Uriah Olathaire, last priest of the Church of the Lightning Stone. Might I have your name?’

The man smiled and shook his hand. A moment of sublime recognition threatened to surface within Uriah’s mind, but it was gone before he could grasp it.

‘My name is not important,’ said the man. ‘But if you wish to call me something, you

may call me Revelation.’

‘An unusual name for one who professes a dislike of priests.’

‘Perhaps, but one that suits my purposes for the time being.’

‘And what purpose might that be?’ asked Uriah.

‘I wish to talk to you,’ said Revelation. ‘I wish to learn what keeps you here when the world is abandoning beliefs in gods and divinity in the face of the advances of science and reason.’

The man looked up, past the banners to the incredible ceiling of the church, and Uriah felt the unease that crawled over his flesh recede as the man’s features softened at the sight of the images painted there.

‘The great fresco of Isandula,’ said Uriah. ‘A divine work, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘It is quite magnificent,’ agreed the man, ‘but divine? I don’t think so.’

‘Then you have not looked closely enough,’ answered Uriah, looking up and feeling his heartbeat quicken as it always did when he saw the wondrous fresco completed over a thousand years ago, by the legendary Isandula Verona. ‘Open your heart to its beauty and you will feel the spirit of god move within you.’

The ceiling was entirely covered in a series of wide panels, each one depicting a different scene; nude figures disporting in a magical garden; an explosion of stars; a battle between a golden knight and a silver dragon; and myriad other scenes of a similarly fantastical nature.

Despite the passage of centuries and the fitful lighting, the vibrancy of hues, the Active architecture, the muscular anatomy of the figures, the dynamic motion, the luminous colouration and the haunting expressions of the subjects were as awe-inspiring as they had been on the day Isandula had set down her brush and allowed herself to die.

‘And the whole world came running when the fresco was revealed,’ quoted Revelation, his gaze lingering on the panel depicting the knight and the dragon. ‘And the sight of it was enough to reduce all who saw it to stunned silence.’

‘You have read your Vastari,’ said Uriah.

‘I have,’ agreed Revelation, only reluctantly tearing his gaze from the ceiling. ‘His works are often given to hyperbole, but in this case he was, if anything, understating

the impact.’

‘You are a student of art?’ asked Uriah.

‘I have studied a great many things in my life,’ said Revelation. ‘Art is but one of them.’

Uriah pointed to the central image of the fresco, that of a wondrous being of light surrounded by a halo of golden machinery.

‘Then you cannot argue that this is not a work truly inspired by a higher power.’

‘Of course I can,’ said Revelation. ‘This is a sublime work whether any higher power exists or not. It does not prove the existence of anything. No gods ever created art.’

‘In an earlier age, some might have considered such a sentiment blasphemy.’

‘Blasphemy,’ said Revelation with a wry smile, ‘is a victimless crime.’

Despite himself, Uriah laughed. ‘Touché, but surely only an artist moved by the divine could create such beauty?’

‘I disagree,’ said Revelation. ‘Tell me, Uriah, have you seen the great cliff sculptures of the Mariana Canyon?’

‘No,’ said Uriah, ‘though I have heard they are incredibly beautiful.’

‘They are indeed. Thousand-metre-high representations of their kings, carved in stone that no weapon can mark or drill can cut. They are at least as incredible as this fresco, somehow worked into a cliff that had not seen sunlight in ten thousand years, yet a godless people carved them in a forgotten age. True art needs no divine explanation, it is just art.’

‘You have your opinion,’ said Uriah politely. ‘I have mine.’

‘Isandula was a genius and a magnificent artist, that much is beyond question,’ continued Revelation, ‘but she also had to make a living, and even magnificent artists must take commissions where they are to be found. I have no doubt this undertaking paid very well, for the churches of her time were obscenely wealthy organisations, but had she been asked to paint a ceiling for a palace of secular governance, might she not have painted something just as wondrous?’

‘It’s possible, but we shall never know.’

‘No, we won’t,’ agreed Revelation, moving past Uriah towards the altar. ‘And I am tempted to believe there is an element of jealousy whenever people invoke the divine to explain away such wonderful creations.’

‘Jealousy?’

‘Absolutely,’ said Revelation. ‘They cannot believe another human being can produce such sublime works of art when they cannot. Therefore some deity reached into the artist’s brain and inspired it.’

‘That is a very cynical view of humanity,’ said Uriah.

‘Elements of it, yes,’ said Revelation.

Uriah shrugged and said, ‘This has been an interesting discussion, but you must excuse me, friend Revelation. I have to prepare for my congregation.’

‘No one is coming,’ said Revelation. ‘It is just you and I.’

Uriah sighed. ‘Why are you really here?’

‘This is the last church on Terra,’ said Revelation. ‘History will soon be done with places like this and I want a memory of it before it’s gone.’

‘I knew this was going to be an unusual evening,’ said Uriah.

URIAH AND REVELATION repaired to the vestry and sat opposite one another at a grand mahogany desk carved with intertwining serpents. The chair creaked under the weight of his guest as Uriah reached into the desk and removed a tall bottle of dusty blue glass and a pair of pewter tumblers.

He poured dark red wine for the pair of them and sat back in his chair.

‘Your good health,’ said Uriah, raising his tumbler.

‘And yours,’ replied Revelation.

Uriah’s guest took a sip of the wine and nodded his head appreciatively.

‘This is very good wine. It’s old.’

‘You have a fine appreciation of wine, Revelation,’ said Uriah. ‘My father gave it to me on my fifteenth birthday and said I should drink it on my wedding night.’

‘And you never married?’

‘Never found anyone willing to put up with me. I was a devilish rogue back then.’

‘A devilish rogue who became a priest,’ said Revelation. ‘That sounds like a tale.’

‘It is,’ said Uriah, ‘But some wounds run deep and it does no good to reopen them.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Revelation, taking another drink of wine.

Uriah regarded his visitor over the top of his tumbler. Now that Revelation had sat down, he had removed his scarlet cloak and draped it over the back of his chair. His guest wore utilitarian clothes, identical to those worn by virtually every inhabitant of Terra, save that his were immaculately clean. He wore a silver ring on his right index finger, which bore a seal of some kind, but Uriah couldn’t make out what device was worked upon it.

‘Tell me, Revelation, what did you mean when you said this place would soon be gone?’

‘Exactly what I said,’ replied Revelation. ‘Even perched all the way up here, you must surely have heard of the Emperor and his crusade to stamp out all forms of religion and belief in the supernatural. Soon his forces will come here and tear this place down.’

‘I know,’ said Uriah sadly. ‘But it makes no difference to me. I believe what I believe and no amount of hectoring from some warmongering despot will alter my beliefs.’

‘That is an obstinate point of view,’ said Revelation.

‘It is faith,’ pointed out Uriah.

‘Faith,’ snorted Revelation. ‘A willing belief in the unbelievable without proof…’

‘What makes faith so powerful is that it requires no proof. Belief is enough.’

Revelation laughed. ‘I see now why the Emperor wants rid of it then. You call faith powerful, I call it dangerous. Think of what people in the grip of faith have done in the past, all the atrocities committed down the centuries by people of faith. Politics has slain its thousands, yes, but religion has slain its millions.’

Uriah finished his wine and said, ‘Have you come here just to provoke me? I am no longer a violent man, but I do take kindly to being insulted in my own home. If this is all you are here for, then I wish you to go now.’

Revelation placed his tumbler back down on the desk and held up his hands.

‘You are right, of course,’ he said. ‘I am being discourteous, and I apologise. I came here to learn of this place, not to antagonise its guardian.’

Uriah nodded graciously. ‘I accept your apology, Revelation. You wish to see the church?’

‘I do.’

‘Then come with me,’ said Uriah, rising painfully from behind his desk, ‘and I will show you the Lightning Stone.’

URIAH LED REVELATION from the vestry back into the nave of the church, once again looking up at the beautiful fresco on the ceiling.

Shards of firelight danced beyond the stained glass of the windows, and Uriah knew that a sizeable group of men waited beyond the walls of his church.

Who was this Revelation and why was he so interested in his church?

Was he one of the Emperor’s warlords, here to earn his master’s favour by demolishing the last church on Terra? Perhaps he was a mercenary chief who sought to earn the new master of Terra’s gratitude by destroying icons of a faith that had endured since the earliest days of mankind’s struggle towards civilisation?

Either way, Uriah needed to know more of this Revelation, to keep him talking and learn what he could of his motives.

‘This way,’ said Uriah, shuffling towards the chancel, an area behind the altar that was curtained off from the rest of the church by a rich emerald drape the size of a theatre curtain. He pulled a silken cord and the drape slid aside to reveal a high, vaulted chamber of pale stone in which stood a tall megalith that rose from the centre of a circular pit in the ground.

The stone was napped like flint and had a distinct, glassy and metallic texture to its surface. The mighty stone was around six metres tall and tapered towards the top, such that it resembled an enormous speartip. The stone reared up from the ground, the tiled floor of the pit laid around it. Patches of wiry, rust-coloured bracken clustered at its base.

‘The Lightning Stone,’ said Uriah proudly, descending a set of stairs built into the ceramic-tiled walls of the pit to place a hand on the stone. He smiled, feeling the moist

warmth of it.

Revelation followed Uriah into the pit, his gaze travelling the length of the stone as he circled it appreciatively. He too reached out to touch it and said, ‘So this is a holy stone?’

‘It is, yes,’ said Uriah.

‘Why?’

‘What do you mean? Why what?’

‘I mean why is it holy? Was it deposited on the ground by your god? Was a holy man martyred here, or did a young girl receive some revelation while praying at its base?’

‘Nothing like that,’ said Uriah, trying to keep the irritation from his voice. ‘Thousands of years ago, a local holy man who was deaf and blind was walking in the hills hereabouts when a sudden storm came in over the western ocean. He hurried back down to the village below, but it was a long way and the storm broke before he could reach safety. The holy man took shelter from the storm in the lee of the stone and at the height of the storm it was struck by a bolt of lightning from the heavens. He was lifted up and saw the stone wreathed in a blue fire in which he saw the face of the Creator and heard His voice.’

‘Didn’t you say this holy man was deaf and blind?’ said Revelation.

‘He was, but the power of god cured him of his afflictions,’ said Uriah. ‘He immediately ran back to the village and told the people there of the miracle.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘The holy man returned to the Lightning Stone and instructed the townspeople to build a church around it. The story of his healing soon spread and within a few years, thousands were crossing the silver bridge to visit the shrine, for a spring had begun to flow from the base of the stone and its waters were said to be imbued with healing properties.’

‘Healing properties?’ asked Revelation. ‘It could cure diseases? Mend broken limbs?’

‘So the church records say,’ said Uriah. ‘This bathing chamber was built around the stone and people came from across the lands to bathe in the sacred waters while they still flowed.’

‘I knew of a similar place far to the east of this land,’ said Revelation. ‘A young girl

claimed to have seen a holy vision of a woman, a holy woman that bore a conspicuous similarity to a religious order of which her aunt was a member. Bathing houses were set up there too, but the men that ran the site were afraid the output of their holy spring would be insufficient, so they only changed the water in the pools twice a day. Hundreds of dying and diseased pilgrims passed through the same water every day, so you can imagine what a horrible slop it was at the end: threads of blood, sloughed-off skin, scabs, bits of cloth and bandage, an abominable soup of ills. The miracle was that anyone emerged alive from this human slime at all, let alone was cured of anything.'

Revelation reached out to touch the stone once more, and Uriah saw him close his eyes as he laid his palm flat on the glistening stone.

'Haematite from a banded ironstone formation,' said Revelation. 'Exposed by a landslip most likely. That would explain the lightning strike. And I have heard of lightning curing people of blindness and deafness, but mostly in those whose suffering was a result of hysterical complaints brought on by earlier traumas rather than any physiological effect.'

'Are you trying to debunk the miracle this church was founded upon?' snapped Uriah. 'There is a malicious streak to you, if you would seek to destroy another's faith.'

Revelation came around the Lightning Stone and shook his head. 'I am not being malicious; I am explaining to you how such a thing could have happened without the intervention of any godly power.'

Revelation tapped a finger to the side of his head and said, 'You think that the way you perceive the world is the way it actually is, but you cannot perceive the external world directly, none of us can. Instead, we know only our ideas or interpretations of objects in the world. The human brain is a marvellously evolved organ, my friend, and it is especially good at constructing images of faces and voices from limited information.'

'What has that to do with anything?' asked Uriah.

'Imagine your holy man sheltering from the storm in the cover of this great stone when the lightning bolt hit, the fire and the noise, the pounding surge of elemental energy pouring through him. Isn't it possible that an already-religious man might, in such desperate circumstances, perceive sights and sounds of a divine nature? After all, humans do it all the time. When you wake with dread in the dead of night, is that darkness in the corner not an intruder instead of just a simple shadow, the creak of a floorboard the tread of a murderer instead of the house settling in the cold night?'

'So you're saying that he imagined it all?'

'Something like that,' agreed Revelation. 'I don't mean to suggest he did so

consciously or deliberately, but given the origins and evolution of religions in the human species, it seems a far more likely and convincing explanation. Don't you agree?'

'No,' said Uriah. 'I don't.'

'You don't?' said Revelation. 'You strike me as a not unintelligent man, Uriah Olathaire. Why can you not concede at least the possibility of such an explanation?'

'Because I too have seen a vision of my god and heard His voice. Nothing can compare with knowing personally and completely that the divine exists.'

'Ah, personal experience,' said Revelation. 'An experience utterly convincing to you and which cannot be proved or disproved. Tell me, where did you receive this vision?'

'On a battlefield in the lands of the Franc,' said Uriah. 'Many years ago.'

'The Franc were long ago brought to Unity,' said Revelation. 'The last battle was fought nearly half a century ago. You must have been a young man back then.'

'I was,' agreed Uriah. 'Young and foolish.'

'Hardly a prime candidate for divine attention,' said Revelation. 'But then I've found that many of the men who appear in the pages of your holy books are far from ideal role models, so perhaps it's not surprising at all.'

Uriah fought down his anger at Revelation's mocking tone, turning away from the Lightning Stone and climbing from the pit. He made his way back towards the candlelit altar, taking a few seconds to calm his breathing and slow his racing heartbeat. He lifted the leather-bound book from beside the candle and took a seat on one of the pews facing the altar.

He heard Revelation's footsteps and said, 'You come in an adversarial mood, Revelation. You say you wish to learn of me and this church? Well come, let us joust with words, thrust and parry one another's certainties with argument and counterargument. Say what you will and we will spar all night if you desire. But come sunrise, you will leave and never return.'

Revelation descended the steps of the altar, pausing to admire the doomsday clock. He saw the book in Uriah's hands and folded his arms.

'That is my intention. I have other matters to attend to, but I have this night to talk with you,' said Revelation, pointing to the book Uriah clutched to his thin chest. 'And if I am adversarial, it is because it infuriates me to see the blinkered wilfulness of those

who live their lives enslaved to such fantastical notions as are contained in that book and others like it – that damnable piece of thunder in your hands.'

'So now you mock my holy book too?'

'Why not?' said Revelation. 'That book is nine centuries worth of agglomerated texts assembled, rewritten, translated and twisted to fit the needs of hundreds of mostly anonymous and unknown authors. What basis is that to take guidance for your life?'

'It is the holy word of my god,' said Uriah. 'It speaks to everyone who reads it.'

Revelation laughed and tapped his forehead. 'If a man claimed his dead grandfather was speaking to him he'd be locked up in an asylum, but if he were to claim the voice of god was speaking to him, his fellow clerics might well make him into a saint. Clearly there is safety in numbers when it comes to hearing voices, eh?'

'This is my faith you are talking about,' said Uriah. 'Show some damned respect!'

'Why should I?' said Revelation. 'Why does your faith require special treatment? Is it not robust enough to stand some questioning? No one else on this world enjoys such protection from scrutiny, so why should you and your faith be singled out for special treatment?'

'I have seen god,' hissed Uriah. 'I saw His face and heard His words in my soul…'

'If you have had such an experience, you may believe it was real, but do not expect me or anyone else to give it credence, Uriah,' said Revelation. 'Just because you believe a thing to be true does not make it so.'

'I saw what I saw and I heard what I heard that day,' said Uriah, his fingers clenching tightly on the book as long-buried memories swam to the surface. 'I know it was real.'

'And where in Franc did this miraculous vision take place?'

Uriah hesitated, reluctant to give voice to the name that would unlock the box in which he had shut the memories of his past life. He took a breath. 'On the killing field of Gaduare.'

'You were at Gaduare,' said Revelation, and Uriah couldn't tell if Revelation's words were a question or simply an acknowledgement.

For the briefest second, it sounded as though Revelation already knew.

'Aye,' said Uriah. 'I was.'

‘Will you tell me what happened?’

‘I’ll tell you of it,’ whispered Uriah. ‘But first I’ll need another drink.’

ONCE AGAIN, URIAH and Revelation returned to the vestry. Uriah reached into a different drawer and removed a bottle, identical to the first, except that this bottle was half-empty. Revelation sat, and Uriah noticed the chair protested once more at his weight, though the man was not especially bulky.

Uriah shook his head as Revelation held out the pewter tumbler and said, ‘No, this is the good stuff. You don’t drink it from a tumbler, you drink it from a glass.’

He opened a walnut cabinet behind his desk and lifted out two cut crystal copitas and deposited them on the desktop amid the clutter of papers and scrolls. He uncorked the bottle and a wonderful peaty aroma filled the room, redolent with the memories of high pastures, fresh, tumbling brooks and dark, shadow-filled woods.

‘The water of life,’ said Uriah, pouring two generous measures and sitting opposite Revelation. The liquid was heavy and amber, the crystal of the glass refracting slivers of gold and yellow through it.

‘Finally,’ said Revelation, lifting his glass to take a drink. ‘A spirit I can believe in.’

Uriah said, ‘No, not yet, let the vapours build. It intensifies the flavour. Swirl it a little. See the little slicks on the side of the glass? They’re called tears, and since they’re long and descending slowly we know the drink is strong and full-bodied.’

‘Can I drink it now?’

‘Patience,’ said Uriah. ‘Carefully nose the drink, yes? Feel how the aromas leap out at you and stimulate your senses. Allow yourself to react to the moment, let the scents awaken the memories of their origin.’

Uriah closed his eyes as he swirled the golden liquid around the glass below his nose, letting the fragrances of a lost time wash over him. He could smell the mellow richness of the alcohol, his memory alight with sensations he had never experienced: running through a wild wood of thorns and heather at sunset, the smoke from a fire in a wooden hall with a woven roof of reeds and which was hung with shields. And above all, he sensed a legacy of pride and tradition encapsulated in each element of the drink.

He smiled as he was taken back to his youth. ‘Now drink,’ he said. ‘A generous sip. Swirl the drink over your tongue, cheeks and palate for a few seconds before you let it

slide down as you swallow.'

Uriah sipped his drink and revelled in the silky smoothness of its warmth. The drink was powerful and tasted of toasted oak and sweet honey.

'Ah, that's a flavour I've not had in a long time,' said Revelation, and Uriah opened his eyes to see a contented smile on his visitor's face. 'I didn't think any remained.'

Revelation's features had relaxed and Uriah saw his cheeks glow with a rosy health. For no reason he could identify, Uriah felt less hostile to Revelation now, as if they had shared a moment of sensation that only two connoisseurs could appreciate.

'It's an old bottle,' explained Uriah. 'One I was able to rescue from the ruin of my parents' home.'

'You make a habit of keeping old alcohol around,' said Revelation.

'A throwback to my wild youth,' said Uriah. 'I was fond of drink a little too much, if you take my meaning.'

'I do. I have seen many great individuals brought low by such an addiction.'

Uriah took another sip, a smaller one this time, and savoured the heady flavours before continuing. 'You said you wanted to know of Gaduare?'

'If you are ready and willing to tell me of it, yes.'

Uriah sighed. 'Willing, yes. Ready… Well, I suppose we will find out, eh?'

'Gaduare was a bloody day,' said Revelation. 'It was hard on all who were there.'

Uriah shook his head. 'My eyes are not what they once were, but I can still tell that you are too young to know of Gaduare. You would not even have been born when that battle was fought.'

'Trust me,' said Revelation. 'I know of Gaduare.'

The tone of Revelation's words sent a shiver down Uriah's spine and, as their eyes met, he saw such a weight of knowledge and history that he felt suddenly humbled and ashamed for arguing with Revelation.

The man put down his glass and the moment passed.

'I should tell you a little of myself first,' said Uriah. 'Who I was back then and how I

came to find god on the battlefield of Gaduare. If you've a mind to hear it, that is…'

'Of course. Tell what you feel you need to tell.'

Uriah sipped his drink and said, 'I was born in the town below this church, nearly eighty years ago, the youngest son of the local lord. My clan had come through the final years of Old Night with much of their wealth intact and they owned all the land around these parts, from this mountain down to the mainland bridge. I wish I could say I was treated badly as a child, you know, to give some reason for why I turned out the way I did, but I can't. I was indulged, and became something of a spoiled brat, given to drinking, carousing and bouts of petulance.'

Uriah sighed. 'Looking back, I realise what a shit I was, but of course it's the lot of old men to look at themselves as youngsters and realise too late all the mistakes they made and regrets they carry. Anyway, I decided in my adolescent fires of rebellion that I was going to travel the world and see whatever free corners of it remained in the wake of the Emperor's conquests. So much of the world had been brought under his sway, but I was determined to find one last patch of land that wasn't yet under the heel of his thunderbolt and lightning armies.'

'You make it sound like the Emperor was a tyrant,' said Revelation. 'He ended the wars that were destroying the planet and defeated dozens of tyrants and despots. Without his armies, mankind would have descended into anarchy and destroyed itself within a generation.'

'Aye, and maybe we'd have been better off that way,' said Uriah, taking another sip of his drink. 'Maybe the universe decided we'd had our chance and our time was up.'

'Nonsense. The universe cares not a whit for our actions or us. Our fate is wrought by our own hands.'

'A philosophical point we'll no doubt return to, but I was telling you of my youth…'

'Yes, of course,' said Revelation. 'Continue.'

'Thank you. Well, after I announced my intention to travel the world, my father was good enough to grant me a generous stipend and a retinue of soldiers to protect me on my journeys. I left that very day and crossed the silver bridge four days later, travelling across a land recovering from war and which was growing fat on labours decreed by the Emperor. Hammers beat out plates of armour, blackened factories churned out weapons and entire towns of seamstresses created new uniforms for his armies. I crossed to Europa and caroused my way across the continent, seeing the eagle-stamped banner everywhere I went. In every town and city, I saw people giving thanks to the Emperor and his mighty thunder giants, though it all seemed hollow, like

they were going through the motions because they were too afraid not to. I'd seen an army of the Emperor's giants once when I was a child, but this was the first time I had seen them in the wake of conquest.'

Uriah's breath caught in his throat as he remembered the warrior's face, leaning down to regard him as though he had been less than an insect. 'I was drunk and whoring my way down the Tali peninsula when I came upon a garrison of the Emperor's super-soldiers at a ruined clifftop fortress and my romantic, rebellious soul couldn't help but try and bait them. Having seen them in battle, I shudder now to think of the hideous danger I was in. I shouted at them, calling them freaks and servants of a bloodthirsty, tyrannical monster whose only thought was the enslavement of mankind to his own towering ego. I paraphrased the works of Seytwn and Galliemus, though how I remembered the old masters when I was so drunk, I'll never know. I thought I was being so clever, and then one of the giants broke ranks and approached me. Like I said, I was monumentally drunk and filled with that sense of invincibility that only drunks and fools know. The warrior was a hulking figure, more massive than any human being should ever be. His brutish frame was encased in heavy powered armour that enclosed his chest and arms, and which I thought was ridiculously exaggerated.'

'In previous wars, most warriors preferred to grapple with one another in close combat rather than use long-range weapons,' said Revelation. 'The power of a warrior's chest and arms were of paramount importance in such feats of arms.'

'Ah, I see,' said Uriah. 'Well, anyway, he came over and lifted me out of my chair, spilling my drink and upsetting me greatly. I kicked at his armour and beat my fists bloody against his chest, but he just laughed at me. I screamed at him to let me go and he did just that, telling me to shut my mouth before tossing me off the cliff and into the sea. By the time I'd climbed back to the village, they were gone and I was left with a hatred as strong as any I'd known. Stupid really, I was asking for it and it was only a matter of time until someone put me in my place.'

'So where did you go after Tali?' asked Revelation.

'Here and there,' said Uriah. 'I've forgotten a lot of those years, I was drunk a lot of the time. I know I took a sand-skimmer across the Mediterranean dust bowl and traversed the wastelands of the Nordafrik Conclaves that Shang Khal reduced to ashen desert. All I found were settlements that paid homage to the Emperor, so I carried onwards far into the east to see the ruins of Ursh and the fallen bastions of Narthan Durme. But even there, in places so far away as to be the most desolate and remote corners of the world, I still found those who gave thanks to the Emperor and his gene-engineered warriors. I couldn't understand it. Didn't these people see that they'd just exchanged one tyrant for another?'

'Humanity was heading for species doom,' said Revelation, sitting forwards in his

chair. ‘I keep telling you that without Unity and the Emperor there would be no human race. I can’t believe you don’t see that.’

‘Oh, I see it all right, but back then I was young and full of the fires of youth that see any form of control as oppression. Though they don’t appreciate it, it’s the function of youth to push at the boundaries of the previous generation, to poke and prod and establish their own rules. I was no different from any other youth. Well, perhaps a little.’

‘So you’d travelled the world and hadn’t found any corner of it that hadn’t sworn allegiance to the Emperor… Where did you go next?’

Uriah refilled their glasses before continuing. ‘I returned home for a spell, bearing gifts I’d mostly stolen along the way, then set off again, but this time I went as a soldier of fortune instead of a tourist. I’d heard there were rumours of unrest in the land of the Franc, and fancied I could earn myself renown. The Franc were a fractious people before Unity and did not take kindly to invaders, even ones posing as benign. When I reached the continent, I heard of Havuleq D’agross and the Battle of Avelroi and rode straight for the town.’

‘Avelroi,’ said Revelation, shaking his head. ‘A town poisoned by the bitterness of a madman whose meagre talents fell far short of his ambition.’

‘I know that now, but the way I heard it at the time, Havuleq found himself wrongly accused of the brutal murder of the woman the Emperor had appointed as his governor. He was set to be shot by a firing squad when his brothers and friends attacked the Army units tasked with his execution. The soldiers were torn to pieces, but some of the townsfolk got themselves killed in the fighting, including the local arbiter’s son, and the mood of the people turned ugly. For all his other faults, and there were many, Havuleq was a speaker of rare skill and he fanned the flames of the townsfolk’s ire at the Emperor’s rule. Within the hour, a hastily formed militia had stormed the Army barracks and slain all the soldiers within.’

‘You know, of course, that Havuleq did assault and murder that woman?’

Uriah nodded sadly. ‘I learned that later, yes, when it was too late to do anything about it.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘By the time I reached Avelroi, full of piss and vinegar for the coming fight, Havuleq had rallied a number of the local townships to his cause and had amassed quite an army.’

Uriah smiled as the details of his early time in Avelroi returned, clearer than they had been for decades. ‘It was a magnificent sight, Revelation, the icons of the Emperor had been torn down and the city was like something from a dream. Colourful bunting hung from every window and marching bands played in the streets every day as Havuleq marched his soldiers up and down. Of course, we should have been training, but we were buoyed up with courage and our own sense of righteous purpose. More and more of the surrounding towns were rising up against their Army garrisons, and within the space of a few months around forty thousand men were ready to fight.’

‘It was everything I’d dreamed of,’ said Uriah. ‘It was a glorious rebellion, courageous and heroic in the grand tradition of the freedom fighters of old. We were to be the spark that would light the fuse of history that would see this planetary autocrat tumbled from his self-appointed rulership of the world. Then we heard that the thunderbolt and lightning army was marching from the east and we set off in grand procession to meet it in battle. It was a joyous day as Havuleq led us from Avelroi, I’ll never forget it: the laughter, the kisses from the girls and the spirit of shared brotherhood that filled us as we marched out to battle. It took us a week to reach Gaduare, a line of high hills directly in the path of our enemies. I had read my share of the ancient stories of battle and knew this was a good place to make our stand. We occupied the high ground and both our flanks were anchored on strong positions. On the left were the ruins of the Gaduare Bastion, on the right a desolate marsh through which nothing could pass.’

‘It was madness to oppose the Emperor’s armies,’ said Revelation. ‘You must have known you could not defeat them. These were warriors bred for battle, whose every waking moment was spent in combat training.’

Uriah nodded. ‘I think we knew that as soon as our enemy came into sight,’ he said, his features darkening at the memory, ‘but we were so caught up in the mood of optimism. By now our army was fifty thousand strong, and we faced less than a tenth of that number. It was hard not to feel like we could win the day, especially with Havuleq riding up and down and firing our blood. His brother tried to calm him, but it was already too late and we charged from the hillside like mad, glorious fools, screaming war cries and waving swords, pistols and rifles above our heads. I was in the sixth rank and we’d covered nearly a kilometre by the time we got anywhere near the ranks of the giants. They hadn’t moved since we’d set off, but as we got close, they shouldered their guns and opened fire.’

Uriah paused and took a long gulp of his drink. His hand was shaking and he carefully and deliberately set his glass down on the desk as he continued.

‘I’ll never forget the noise,’ he said. ‘It was like a thunderstorm had suddenly sprung into existence, and our first five ranks were completely cut down, dead to a man without even the time to scream. The enemy’s bolts tore limbs from bodies or simply

burst men apart like wet sacks. I turned to shout something, I forget what exactly, when I felt a searing pain in the back of my head and I fell over the remains of a man who'd had his entire left side blown off. It looked like he'd exploded from the inside out.

'I rolled onto my knees and felt the back of my head. It was sticky and matted with blood and I realised I'd been hit. A ricochet or a fragment. Anything larger and I'd have lost my head. I could feel the blood running from me and looked up in time to see our enemies fire again. That's when I started to hear screams. Our charge had ground to a halt, men and women milling around in confusion and fear as they suddenly understood the reality of what Havuleq had begun.

'The thunder warriors put up their guns and marched towards us, unsheathing swords with serrated edges and motorised blades. The noise, oh god, I'll never forget the noise they made. A roar like something out of a nightmare. We were already beaten, their first volley had broken us, and I saw Havuleq lying dead in the middle of the field. The lower half of his body had been blown clean off and I saw the same terror I was feeling on every face around me. People were begging for mercy, throwing down their weapons and trying to surrender, but the armoured warriors didn't stop. They marched right up to us and hacked into us without mercy. We were cut apart and brutalised with such economy of force that I couldn't believe so many people could die in so short a time. This wasn't war, at least not as I'd read about it, where men of honour fought in glorious duels, this was mechanised butchery.

'I'm not ashamed to say I ran. I ran, soiled and bleeding, for safety. I ran like all the daemons of legend were after me and all the time I was hearing the awful sound of people dying, the wet sound of flesh splitting open and the stench of voided bowels and opened bellies. I can't remember anything much of my flight, just random flashes of dead bodies and screams of pain. I ran until I couldn't run any more, and then I crawled through the mud until I lost consciousness. When I woke, which I was surprised I did at all, I saw it was dark. Pyres had been lit and the victory chants of the thunder warriors drifted over the killing field.

'Havuleq's army had been destroyed. Not routed or put to flight. Destroyed. In less than an hour, fifty thousand men and women had been killed. I think I knew even then that I was the only survivor. I wept beneath the moonlight and as I lay there bleeding to death in agony, I thought of how pointless my life had been. The heartbreak and ruin I'd visited upon others in my reckless pursuit of hedonism and self-interest. I wept for my family and myself and that was when I realised I wasn't alone.'

'Who was with you?' asked Revelation.

'The power of the divine,' said Uriah. 'I looked up and saw a golden face above me, a face of such radiance and perfection that my tears were no longer shed for pain, but

for beauty. Light surrounded this figure and I averted my eyes for fear I'd be blinded. I'd been in pain, but now that pain was gone and I knew I was seeing the face of the divine. I couldn't describe that face to you, not with all the poetic images in the world at my disposal, but it was the most exquisite thing I had ever seen.

'I felt myself lifted up and I thought that this was the end for me. And then the face spoke to me, and I knew I was destined to live.'

'What did this face say to you?' asked Revelation.

Uriah smiled. 'He said, "Why do you deny me? Accept me and you will know that I am the only truth and the only way".'

'Did you reply?'

'I couldn't,' said Uriah. 'To utter any words would have been base. In any case, my tongue was quite stilled by the awesome vision of god.'

'What made you think it was god? Did you not hear what I said earlier about the brain's ability to perceive what it wants to? You were a dying man on a battlefield, surrounded by your dead comrades and you were having an epiphany of the futility of the life you had led. Surely you can think of another explanation for this vision, Uriah, a more likely explanation that does not require the supernatural?'

'I need no other explanation,' said Uriah, firmly. 'You may be wise in many things, Revelation, but you cannot know what goes on in my own mind. I heard the voice of god and saw His face. He bore me up and set me into a deep slumber, and when I awoke, my wounds were healed.'

Uriah turned his head so that Revelation could see the long scar on the back of his neck. 'A piece of bone shrapnel had been embedded in my skull, barely a centimetre from severing my spinal cord. I was alone on the battlefield and I decided to return to the land of my birth, but when I returned I found my family home in ruins. The townsfolk told me that Scandian raiders from the north had heard of my family's wealth and come south in search of plunder. They killed my brother then violated my mother and sister in front of my father to force him to tell them where he hid his treasures. They couldn't know my father had a weak heart and he died before they could learn his secrets. I found my home in ruins and my family little more than bleached cadavers.'

'I am sorry to hear of your loss,' said Revelation. 'If it is any consolation, the Scandians would not accept Unity and were wiped out three decades ago.'

'I know, but I do not revel in death any more,' said Uriah. 'The men who killed my

family will have been judged by god and that is justice enough for me.'

'That is noble of you,' said Revelation, real admiration in his voice.

'I took a few keepsakes from the ruins and made my way to the nearest settlement, thinking I'd get blind drunk and then try to figure out what to do with my life. I was halfway there when I saw the Church of the Lightning Stone and knew I had found my purpose in life. I had spent my life until that point living only for myself, but when I saw the spire of the church I knew that god had a purpose for me. I should have died at Gaduare, but I was saved for a reason.'

'And what reason was that?'

'To serve god,' said Uriah. 'To bring His word to the people.'

'And that's what you've been doing here?'

Uriah nodded. 'It's what I've been trying to do, but the Emperor's promulgators traverse the globe with his message of reason and the refutation of gods and the supernatural. I assume that is why you are here and why none of my congregation has come to the church tonight.'

'You are correct,' said Revelation. 'In a manner of speaking. I have come to try and convince you of the error of your ways, to learn of you and to show you that there is no need for any divine powers to guide humanity. This is the last church on Terra and it falls to me to offer you this chance to embrace the new way willingly.'

'Or?'

Revelation shook his head. 'There is no "or", Uriah. Come, let us go back out into the church as we talk, I want to instruct you of all that belief in gods has done for humanity down the ages, the bloodshed, the horror and the persecution. I will tell you of this and you will see how damaging such belief is.'

'And then what? You'll be on your way?'

'We both know that's not what's going to happen, don't we?'

'Yes,' said Uriah, draining the last of his drink. 'We do.'

'LET ME TELL you a story that happened many thousands of years ago,' said Revelation.

They walked along the north transept of the church, coming to a set of spiral stairs

that led to the upper cloisters. Revelation followed after Uriah, talking as he climbed. ‘It is a story of how a herd of gene-bred livestock caused the death of over nine hundred people.’

‘Did they stampede?’ asked Uriah.

‘No, it was a handful of half-starved creatures that escaped from their paddocks outside Xozer, a once-great city of the Nordafrik Conclaves.’

They reached the top of the stairs and began walking along the cloister, its confined walls dark and cold. Dust lay thick on the stone-flagged floor and a handful of thick candles that Uriah could not remember lighting guttered in iron sconces.

‘Xozer? I’ve been there,’ said Uriah. ‘At least I saw what my guide told me were its ruins.’

‘Quite possibly. Anyway, these hungry animals walked through a building holy to one of the many cults that called Xozer home. This cult, which was known as the Xozerites, believed that gene-bred meat was an affront to their god and they blamed a rival sect known as the Upashtar for the defilement. The Xozerites went on a rampage, stabbing and clubbing any Upashtar they could find. Of course, the Upashtar retaliated and rioting spread throughout the city and left close to a thousand people dead.’

‘Is there a point to that story?’ said Uriah, when Revelation did not continue.

‘Absolutely, it tells a universal tale and typifies religious behaviour that has been recurring since the beginning of human history.’

‘A slightly far-fetched example, Revelation. One freakish story cannot serve as a proof that belief in the divine is a bad thing. Such belief is the bedrock of moral order. It gives people the character they need to get through life. Without guidance from above, the world would descend into anarchy.’

‘Sadly, millions once held that view, Uriah, but that old truism just isn’t true. The record of human experience shows that where religion is strong, it causes cruelty. Intense beliefs produce intense hostility. Only when faith loses its force can a society hope to become humane.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ said Uriah, stopping by one of the arches in the cloister and looking down onto the nave. Dust swirled across the floor, blown by the storm winds chasing around the lonely church. ‘My holy book gives instruction on how to live a good life. It has lessons humanity needs.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Revelation. ‘I have read your holy book and much of it is bloody

and vengeful. Would you live your life literally by its commandments, or do you view the people who populate its pages as exemplars of proper behaviour? Either way, I suspect the morals espoused would be horrifying to most people.'

Uriah shook his head. 'You're missing the point, Revelation. Much of the text is not meant to be taken literally, it is symbolic or allegorical.'

Revelation snapped his fingers. 'That's exactly my point. You pick and choose which bits of your book to take literally and which to read as symbolic, and that choosing is a matter of personal decision, not divinity. Trust me, in ages past, a frightening number of people took their holy books absolutely literally, causing untold misery and death because they truly believed the words they read. The history of religion is a horror story, Uriah, and if you doubt it, just look at what humanity has done in the name of their gods over the millennia. Thousands of years ago, a bloody theocracy that venerated a feathered-serpent god rose in the Mayan jungles. To appease this vile god, its priests drowned maidens in sacred wells and cut out the hearts of children. They believed this serpent god had an earthly counterpart and the temple builders drove the first pile through a maiden's body to pacify this non-existent creature.'

Uriah turned to Revelation in horror and said, 'You can't seriously compare my religion to such heathen barbarism?'

'Can't I?' countered Revelation. 'In the name of your religion, a holy man launched a war with the battle cry of "Deus Vult", which means "god wills it" in one of the ancient tongues of Old Earth. His warriors were charged with destroying enemies in a far-off kingdom, but first they fell upon those in their own lands who opposed the war. Thousands were dragged from their homes and hacked to death or burned alive. Then, satisfied their homeland was secure, the zealous legions plundered their way thousands of miles to the holy city they were to liberate. Upon reaching it, they killed every inhabitant to "purify" the symbolic city of taint. I remember one of their leaders saying that he rode in blood up to the knees and even to his horse's bridle, by the just and marvellous judgement of god.'

'That is ancient history,' said Uriah. 'You cannot vouchsafe the truth of events so lost in the mists of time.'

'If it were one event, I might agree with you,' replied Revelation, 'but just a hundred or so years later, another holy man declared war on a sect of his own church. His warriors laid siege to the sect's stronghold in ancient Franc, and when the city fell his generals asked their leader how they might tell the faithful from the traitor among the captives. This man, who followed your god, ordered the warriors to "Kill them all. God will know His own". Nearly twenty thousand men, women and children were slaughtered. Worst of all, the hunt for any that had escaped the siege led to the establishment of an organisation known as the Inquisition, a dreadful, monstrous

plague of hysteria that gave its agents free rein to stretch, burn, pierce and break their victims on fiendish pain machines to force them to confess to disbelief and identify fellow transgressors. Later, with most of their enemies hunted down and killed, the Inquisition shifted its focus to wychcraft, and priests tortured untold thousands of women into confessing that they engaged in unnatural acts with daemons. They were then burned or hanged for their confessions and this hysteria raged for three centuries in a dozen nations, a madness that saw whole towns exterminated and over a hundred thousand dead.'

'You pick the most extreme examples from the past, Revelation,' said Uriah, struggling to maintain his composure in the face of such tales of murder and bloodshed. 'Times have moved on and humanity no longer behaves in such ways to one another.'

'If you believe that then you have been shut away in this draughty church for far too long, Uriah,' said Revelation. 'You must have heard of Cardinal Tang, a mass-murdering ethnarch who practised a crude form of eugenics. His bloody pogroms and death camps saw millions dead in the Yndonesic Bloc. He died less than thirty years ago after seeking to return the world to a pre-technological age, emulating the Inquisition's burning of scientists, mathematicians and philosophers who contradicted the church's view on cosmology.'

Uriah could stand no more and walked towards the stairs at the far end of the cloister that led down into the narthex. 'You fixate on the blood and death, Revelation. You forget all the good that can be achieved through faith.'

'If you think religion is a force for good, Uriah, then you're not seeing the superstitious savagery that pervades the history of our world,' said Revelation. 'It's true that just before the descent of Old Night, religion gradually lost its power over life, but like the worst kind of poison, it lingered and fostered division amongst the people of the world that endured. Without belief in gods, divisions blur with passing ages; new generations adapt to new times, mingle, intermarry and forget ancient wounds. It is only belief in gods and divine entities that keep them alien to one another, and anything that divides people breeds inhumanity. Religion is the canker in mankind's heart that serves such an ugly purpose.'

'Enough!' snapped Uriah. 'I have heard enough. Yes, people have done terrible things to one another in the name of their gods, but they have done terrible things to one another without the recourse to their beliefs. An acceptance of gods and an afterlife is a vital part of what makes us who we are. If you take that away from humanity, what do you suggest takes its place? In my many years as a priest I have ministered to many dying people, and the emotional benefits of religion's power to console them and those left behind cannot be underestimated.'

'There is a flaw in your logic, Uriah,' said Revelation. 'Religion's power to console

gives it absolutely no more credence or validity. It might very well be a comfort to a dying man to believe that he will go to some bountiful paradise of endless joy, but even if he dies with a wonderful smile on his face, it means nothing in the grand scheme of things as far as the truth of the matter is concerned.'

'Maybe not, but when my time comes, I will die with my god's name on my lips.'

'Are you afraid to die, Uriah?' asked Revelation.

'No.'

'Truly?'

'Truly,' said Uriah. 'I have my share of sins, but I have spent my life in the service of my god and I believe that I have served Him faithfully and well.'

'So why is it then, when you go to these people who are dying and clinging to their beliefs that they don't welcome the end of their life? Surely the gathered family and friends should be of good cheer and should celebrate their relative's passing? After all, if eternal paradise awaits on the other side, why are they not filled with gleeful anticipation? Could it be that, in their heart of hearts, they don't really believe it?'

Uriah turned away and made his way down the narthex stairs, his anger and frustration giving him force of pace that quite outweighed the stiffness in his limbs. A cold wind blew in from the outer doors and he could hear the mutter of voices and the scrape of metal on metal from outside. The narthex of the Church of the Lightning Stone was an austere place, stone walls with niches in which sat statues of various saints that had passed this way in the thousands of years the church had stood. A swaying candelabra, empty of candles, hung from the roof, but it had been many years since Uriah had been able to climb the stepladder in the store room to replace them.

He pushed open the door to the church and walked stiffly down the nave towards the altar. Four of the six candles he had lit there had gone out and the fifth guttered and died in the wind that entered with him.

The lone candle burned beside the clock and Uriah made his way towards it as he heard Revelation enter the church behind him. Uriah reached the altar and lowered himself to a kneeling position with some difficulty.

He bowed his head before the altar and clasped his hands together.

'The Lord of Mankind is the Light and the Way, and all His actions are for the benefit of mankind, which is His people. So it is taught in the holy words of our order, and above all things, god will protect…'

‘There’s no one there to hear you,’ said Revelation from behind him.

‘I don’t care what you say any more. You have come here to do what you feel you need to do and I’ll not buttress your ego and self-righteousness by playing along any longer. So just end this charade.’

‘As you wish,’ said Revelation. ‘No more games.’

A golden light built behind Uriah and he saw his shadow thrown out onto the graven surface of the altar. The pearlescent hands of the clock shimmered in the reflected light and the ebony face gleamed.

Where once the church had been gloomy and filled with shadows, it was now a place of light.

Uriah pulled himself to his feet and turned to see a wondrous figure standing before him, towering and magnificent, clad in golden armour fashioned with love and the greatest skill, every plate embossed with thunderbolts and eagles.

Gone was Revelation, and in his place was a towering warrior of exquisite splendour, an exemplar of all that was regal and inspirational in humanity. The armour bulked his form out beyond measure and Uriah felt tears spilling from his eyes as he realised he had seen this breathtakingly, achingly perfect face once before.

On the killing fields of Gaduare.

‘You…’ breathed Uriah, stumbling back and collapsing onto his haunches. Pain shot through his hip and pelvis, but he barely felt it.

‘Now do you understand the futility of what you do here?’ said the golden giant.

Long dark hair spilled around the warrior’s face, a face that Uriah could only see through the hazy lens of memory. He could see the unremarkable features of Revelation subsumed into the warrior’s countenance, itself so worthy of devotion that it took all Uriah’s self-control not to drop to his knees and offer what remained of his life to its glorification.

‘You…’ repeated Uriah, the pain in his bones no match for the pain in his heart. ‘You are the… the… Emperor…’

‘I am, and it is time to go, Uriah,’ said the Emperor.

Uriah looked around at his now gleaming and brightly lit church. ‘Go? Go where?

There is nowhere else for me in this godless world of yours.'

'Of course there is,' replied the Emperor. 'Embrace the new way and be part of something incredible. A world and a time where we stand on the brink of achieving everything we ever dreamed.'

Uriah nodded dumbly and felt a firm hand gently take his arm and lift him to his feet once more. Strength flowed from the Emperor's grip and Uriah felt the aches and ailments that had plagued him for decades fade until they were little more than evil memories.

He looked up at Isandula Verona's magnificent fresco, and the breath caught in his throat. Colours once dulled by the darkness now blazed with life and the ceiling seemed to burst with life and vitality as the Emperor's light gave it fresh animation and vibrancy. The skin of the painted figures shone with vitality, and the livid blues and lusty reds radiated potency.

'Verona's work was never meant for darkness,' said the Emperor. 'Only in the light can it achieve its full potential. Humanity is the same, and only when the suffocating shadows of a religion that teaches us not to question is gone from this world will we see its true brilliance.'

Uriah only reluctantly tore his eyes from the impossibly beautiful fresco and cast his gaze around his church. The stained-glass windows shone with new life and the intricate, subtle architecture of the interior gleamed with the skill of its builders.

'I will miss this place,' said Uriah.

'In time I will build an Imperium of such grandeur and magnificence that this will seem like a pauper's hovel,' said the Emperor. 'Now, let us be on our way.'

Uriah allowed himself to be guided down the nave, his heart heavy with the knowledge that the course of his life had been altered by, at best, a misunderstanding, at worst, a lie. As he followed the Emperor towards the narthex doors, he looked up at the ceiling once more, recalling the sermons he had delivered here, the people who had hung on his every word and the good that had flowed from this place and into the world.

He smiled suddenly as he realised that it didn't matter whether his life and faith had been based on a falsehood. He had believed what he had seen and he had come to this place with a heart open and emptied by grief. That openness had allowed the spirit of his god to enter his soul and filled the emptiness within him with love.

What makes faith so powerful is that it requires no proof. Belief is enough.

He had devoted his life to his god, and even with the understanding of how his fate had been manipulated by random chance, he found no resentment in his heart. He had spread a doctrine of love and forgiveness from his pulpit and no amount of clever words would make him regret that.

The door to the narthex was still open and, as they passed through its cold embrace, the Emperor pushed open the main doors of the church.

Howling wind and sheets of rain blew inwards and Uriah clasped his robes tightly to his body, feeling the night's cold stab into his body like a thousand shards of ice.

He looked over his shoulder towards the altar of his church, seeing the lone candle beside the doomsday clock snuffed out by the gale.

Once again, his church was swathed in darkness and he sighed to see this last illumination extinguished. The wind blew the internal doors shut and Uriah followed the Emperor out into the darkness.

Rain soaked him instantly and a crash of lightning lit the heavens with an actinic blue glow. Hundreds of warriors stood in ordered ranks before the church, brutal giants in pugnacious armour he had last seen on the battlefield of Gaduare.

They stood immobile beneath the downpour, the rain beating against the burnished plates of bronze in an unrelenting tattoo and causing their scarlet helmet plumes to hang limply at their shoulders. There had been some refinements, saw Uriah, the armour now all-enclosing and each warrior sealed from the elements by an interlocking series of artfully designed plates.

Huge backpacks vented excess heat in steaming plumes like breath, and each of the warriors carried a burning torch that hissed and fizzed in the downpour. Huge guns were slung over their shoulders and Uriah shivered as he remembered the murderous volley, like the thunder at the end of the world, that had felled so many of his comrades.

The Emperor put a long cloak about Uriah's shoulders as a group of armoured warriors stepped towards the church with flame lances raised. Uriah wanted to protest, to speak out against what they were about to do, but the words died in his throat as he realised they would have no effect.

Tears streamed down his face along with the rain as torrents of flame erupted from the warriors' weapons and licked over the roof and walls of the church. Other warriors fired grenades that smashed through the stained-glass windows of the church and percussive booms thudded from inside as the hungry flames took hold of the roof.

Thick smoke billowed from the windows, the rain doing nothing to dampen the destructive ambition of the flames, and Uriah wept to think of the wondrous fresco and the thousands of years of history that was being destroyed.

He turned to look up at the Emperor, the warrior's face lit by the fires of destruction.

'How can you do this?' demanded Uriah. 'You say you stand for reason and the advancement of understanding, but here you are destroying a repository of knowledge!'

The Emperor looked down at him and said, 'Some things are best left forgotten.'

'Then I hope you have foreseen the consequences of a world bereft of religion.'

'I have,' replied the Emperor. 'It is my dream. An Imperium of Man that exists without recourse to gods and the supernatural. A united galaxy with Terra at its heart.'

'A united galaxy?' said Uriah, averting his gaze from his blazing church as he finally grasped the scale of the Emperor's ambition.

'Indeed. Now that Unity has been achieved on Terra, it is time to reclaim humanity's lost empire among the stars.'

'With you at its head, I presume?' said Uriah.

'Of course. Nothing of such grand scale can be achieved without a singular vision at its heart, least of all the reconquest of the galaxy.'

'You are a madman,' said Uriah. 'And you are arrogant if you believe you can subjugate the stars with warriors such as these. They are powerful to be sure, but even they are not capable of such a thing.'

'You are right,' agreed the Emperor. 'I will not conquer the galaxy with these men, for they are but men. These are the precursors to the warriors I am forging in my gene-labs, warriors with the strength and power and vision to bestride the battlefields of the stars and bring them to compliance. These warriors shall be my generals and they will lead my great crusade to the furthest corners of the galaxy.'

'Didn't you just tell me of the bloody slaughters perpetrated by crusaders?' said Uriah. 'Doesn't that make you no better than the holy men you were telling me about?'

'The difference is I know I am right,' said the Emperor.

'Spoken like a true autocrat.'

The Emperor shook his head. ‘You misunderstand, Uriah. I have seen the narrow survival path that is all that stands between humanity and extinction, and this is the way it must begin.’

Uriah looked back at the church, the gleeful flames reaching high into the darkness.

‘It is a dangerous road you travel,’ said Uriah. ‘To deny humanity a thing will only make them crave it all the more. And if you succeed in this grand vision of yours? What then? Beware that your subjects do not begin to see you as a god.’

Uriah looked into the Emperor’s face as he spoke, now seeing past the glamours and the magnificence to the heart of an individual who had lived a thousand lives and walked the Earth for longer than could be imagined. He saw the ruthless ambition and the molten core of violence at the Emperor’s heart. In that instant, Uriah knew he wanted nothing to do with anything this man had to offer, no matter how noble or lofty his ambitions might be.

‘I hope in the name of all that is holy you are right,’ said Uriah, ‘but I dread the future you are forging for humanity.’

‘I wish only the best for my people,’ promised the Emperor.

‘I think you do, but I will not be a part of it,’ said Uriah, casting off the Emperor’s cloak and walking back towards his church with his head held high. The rain beat down on him, but he welcomed it as a baptismal.

He heard footsteps approaching him, but he heard the Emperor say, ‘No. Leave him.’

The outer doors of the church stood open and Uriah walked into the narthex, feeling the heat of the flames as they billowed around him. The statues were on fire and the doors to the nave were gone, blown off their hinges by the blasts of grenades.

Uriah marched into the blazing heat of the church, seeing a wall of flame devouring the pews and silken hangings with insatiable hunger. Smoke filled the air and the fresco above him was almost obscured by the roiling blackness.

He looked at the clock face on the altar and smiled as the flames closed in around him.

THE WARRIORS REMAINED outside the church until it collapsed, the roof timbers crashing down into the building in a tremendous flurry of flying sparks and wreckage. They stayed until the first rays of sunlight crested the mountains and the rain finally extinguished the last of the flames.

The ruins of the last church on Terra smouldered in the chill morning air as the Emperor turned away and said, ‘Come, we have a galaxy to conquer.’

As the Emperor and his warriors marched down the hillside, the only sound to be heard was the soft chiming of an old and broken clock.