

XVI. The Tower

by /a/non

The cracked moon shone bright in the starlit skies of the Old Earth, its pale light shaping the silhouette of the last crumbling tower of Dolarest, a rare vestige of that Ithlumiun people who had once, in a more enlightened era, ruled as masters of all those territories touched by the children of Gaia. Yet none who looked down from that lofty height would guess that once a great empire ruled here, for all that could be seen, as far as the eye might reach, was fire and ash.

The top of that tower was like a vast, living tangle of serpents, if each were made of wire and steel tubes rather than flesh and scales. The shifting movements of the tubes, and the glowing light that came from beneath, gave the impression of that ancient primordial ocean from which ancient man had claimed the gods had brought forth all life from—and, indeed, there were men in his day who might claim that a god existed. For this, the last super-computer of the Old Earth, was powered now by the still-beating heart of what mankind had so boldly named the King of Demons, which many had been made to worship in the past eon. Few were there who would contest such a claim, for one need look only to the shadow of the tower to see the great fifty kilometer gash in the ground, from where he first struck down the gods of space with his blade.

In the heart of that vast mass sat enthroned one of the rare few who might contest that claim, for she had been accounted among those who had subdued that great monster, and pulled the beating heart from its chest. Her name was Natalia Evening-Chronicle, the Ruins Queen, formerly the High Archivist of the Ash Legion, and now the last survivor among its officers. More cunning was she than most, and it was indeed a matter of guile and foresight that she remained atop that tower, while countless of her brothers and sisters were devoured by the all-consuming holocaust that swept the Old Earth below. The red-orange flames

flickered in the reflection of her own blood-red eyes, set into the preternaturally beautiful, ethereally pale face of a woman whose young appearance belied a lifetime of conflict, which had seen the passing of ten and two thousand years of human history.

On this night of fire and ash, though, it was not the flames that interested her, nor the countless souls that burned below. It was instead a single man, standing atop the rooftop. Whereas she was garbed in a resplendent dress of black lotus silk, that man was the image of a traveler from a distant, and by no means less rugged past. A long coat for warding off dust, a wide hat, and boots for the road shaped his dress. The man himself was equally rugged, his white beard and rough skin contrasting him against the beauty who sat before him. His dark eyes, though not facing the fires below, nevertheless blazed with the unquenchable fire of a human spirit.

Slowly, the edge of Natalia's lip began to curl, shaping into the face of that thin smile which had been the last sight of a thousand men or more, and with a faint glimpse at her long and sharp canines. She said to the man before, "And who are you, that would intrude uninvited into my domain?"

In response, the man proclaimed to her, "Natalia Evening-Chronicle—I am Father Jeremiah Stonefield, and I have come to bring an end to your calamitous reign. Many of your kind have I faced already, and each I have condemned to the judgment of God the Most High. Yet in spite of the precautions, I hold no illusions of surprising you. For though all and sundry know of your arrogance and pride, so too is it said that none other among the ashen generals exceeds you in the realm of information."

Natalia twisted her body in her seat and leaned slightly forward. Her legs crossed over each other as her right elbow lowered to rest upon the dragon-head shaped arm of her great throne. Against her raised right hand she set her chin, raising the intensity of her stare as she gazed at the man. She said to him, then, "Indeed, rumors of a hunter have reached my ears. But rumors, however useful they might be, can speak only of what man does. To know a man's heart, he must be confronted. Tell me,

child of man, what has motivated you to challenge my tower? A hundred traps and more I have set, in this place, and guardians aplenty. Failed experiments, broken legionnaires, bound imps, thinking machines, and even the last remnants of the foreign beasts from the skies—but one of the least of these can match a dozen men, and enough I have gathered here to face an army. Yet humble though you look, to be standing before me, torn more by the cruel passage of time than any of my defenses, an army you must well be worth. How did such a spirit come to dwell within me?”

“Such a spirit? You misunderstand. I have walked this world and seen its many corners, and in each, met men of all sorts. In my heart burns the fire that dwells within all men, and each I have passed, has passed that fire to me. Burned though their bodies may be, their spirits, greater and more luminous by far, all survive within me. The Spirit of the Most High stands behind me, my guardian and my guide, and by His will I will show you the brilliance of a humanity you have abandoned. Monster, queen of vampires, I have come to slay you, for you do not belong in this world.”

“Thus say you, man of the present day, for so easily you forget. It was humans who abandoned your Most High, humans who created their own demons to protect against the invaders from the stars, and humans who—when their creations turned upon them—raised us up from corpses as weapons, and in the end sought so casually to discard us. The genetic material which is your life’s blood has been a small price to pay, I think, for the mercy the children of ash showed to you, our forebearers, and for all that we have granted you. For it was we who recovered what was of the old sciences, and we who have given you a world to be fruitful and multiply. Is such a thing truly so monstrous?”

“Say you this, though you sit high upon this throne, while the world burns beneath your feet? Your mercy, as you describe it, is to see humans as no more than livestock. What else might you call that, besides monstrous?”

“Why, I would call it human! Is it not the most human thing

of all, to be a master of the lesser beasts? But as you well know, a man must watch the beast he cares for, lest they turn upon him. He does not walk among his herds without precaution, for should they seek to trample him, he would be buried under the weight. So, too, have we been cautious with you. For you who created us, higher beings than yourself, have feared us from the start. Make justification as you might like, o child of man, but they are there only to soothe your own soul.”

At this, she stood from her throne, and gazed down from the high spot to the man before her. With a gaze that shone with such intensity it might kill a man of weaker will, she declared, “Yet if you declare yourself to be such a wild herd, then I shall warn you this—I will not be broken under hoof nor heel so easily. Child of man, in respect for your will in making it here, I will not do you the disgrace of granting you the possibility of quarter. Your life I declare as forfeit, while your blood I shall take, and with it, the memories of each of my kin you have slain. Your broken husk I shall cast from atop this tower into the flames below, where your spirit might burn until the Old Earth is at least cleansed, and the survivors stumble at last upon my tower’s door.”

“No justification do I need, vampire, for those very flames are my justification. For it is by the hands of your kind that these fires rage below us. Once I have sent you back down to Hell, I will destroy this tower, and the old sciences with it. And with that, the mistakes of the past, of these countless eons of human folly, shall at least come to an end.”

No more, then, need to be said by the two of them. The terms of their battle, that between man and monster, had been set and agreed upon. Natalia reached to her shoulder, and pulled her dress away, revealing the more ostentatious dress beneath. She wore a sleeveless bodice-like top, with tight red and black fabric lined with golden thread and metal lace, which put her cleavage on sharp display. A short skirt ran beneath it, exposing her thighs down to the point where her violet stockings begin. They, too, were laced in gold, which was the color of her shoes. Black gloves of mismatched length were upon her hands—with

gold bracelets, of course—while on her neck sat a golden necklace, with a great blood-red ruby sat upon it. The dress in her hand shifted and warped into the form of a sword. The hilt of the weapon was as gold wrapped in topaz, while its cross-guard was like similarly wrapped sapphire. The blade, in turn, was like ruby more brilliant than the one she wore on her neck, and pulsed with an ominous power like the heartbeat of a hateful living thing.

In turn, Father Jeremiah reached into his coat, and pulled out an old, tattered book. By the appraisal of a vampire, who had been ancient when the seeds had first been planted for the trees from which its pages were made, it was no special thing. And yet a book, in the end, is not defined by the paper upon which it is written. It is defined by its words, and the words in this book were very old, and very powerful even now. Though languages had changed, and the passing of eons had obscured the histories within to a mere blip upon the vast canvas of human history, the full weight of that history rested in the hands of the man who held that holy book. With a simple gesture, he raised it up, and kissed it. Then, slipping it back into his coat, he pulled out a long revolver and shot the vampire.

The sound of the gunshot from the old-fashioned weapon sang out across the night. Natalia's blade was first to fall from her hand. Then, her knees slumped to the ground. Next, the rest of her body fell with her, and her face struck the hard ground. The open hole through her forehead bled out to the ground below, and with nary a sound from her proud lips, she laid still on the ground.

Jeremiah stood there, for a moment. He lowered his revolver, and shot again. Natalia's body flopped a bit, her head popping like a grape and spreading a shower of gore across the area. A slight look of confusion fell upon his otherwise stoic face, as he slowly stepped forward, holding his revolver at his side. Approaching the deceased vampire, he asked, "Is that it? Have you no other tricks? No form of regeneration, or means of retaliation?"

No response came from the still body. He crouched down and, reaching his left hand slowly, poked it. Then, seeing no other response, he poked it again. Still it remained limp, with no signs of any movement coming from the dead woman.

“...truly? No, that’s not right. This is all by the power of God, of course, let His name be praised...you aren’t playing dead, are you?”

Still no response came from the vampire. Only a growing pool of blood. Scratching his head, he knelt down to lift the still corpse and turned around, looking at the orange-tinted horizon, and found himself almost unconsciously drawn in that direction. The whole Earth, it seemed, was completely wrapped in those all-consuming flames. It was almost a certainty, he felt, that there would be survivors. Just as he stood now at the top of the tower, there were many places for mankind to live. Upon the peaks of mountains, in the depths of the seas, in bunkers deep below the Earth, and in stations orbiting the sky or built into the Moon, there were almost certainly survivors. So, too, would their creations no doubt persist. Even in the midst of this, that hope remained, as well as that threat. But as unexpectedly quick as it might have been, he felt that his mission—to remove the most dangerous threat—was finished.

Reflecting on the souls lost to the calamity, he looked down to the body he was cradling, and cast it into the inferno below. Quietly he uttered the words, “And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

However, at that very moment, a strange sensation came upon him. He turned around, with his firearm poised again, and found himself faced against that great throne. There sat Natalia Evening-Chronicle dressed in her dark robes, and with not a mark upon her. Nor was the bloodstain, which had been scattered across the ground, still present. With her legs crossed, and a smirk upon her faced, she asked him, “How do you think to accomplish such a feat? Do you think a lone bullet would be enough for me? Or that you might cast me into those flames, to prevent my regeneration? You are a truly foolish human. You

cannot condemn a child of ash to the flame, and expect that she will not rise again, as many times as needed.”

“You—this is not right...”

He looked down at his feet. He had been standing on the edge, before. His head felt foggy, as if his memories weren't quite matching up. What was the last thing she said? What was the last thing he had said? But the more effort he put into attempting to put events into a proper order, the more of a mess it became. Natalia raised an eyebrow, watching him, and asked, “Oh? Did you actually manage to see it? Impressive.”

“My faith and will are strong, monster. Your treachery and illusions can only go so far. Were you wise, you would have taken the chance to kill me while you could. Now that I have seen your tricks, I will not fall for them.”

“It is not a matter of falling for them, human. Now, shall we try this again?”

Once again, she drew her dress away, revealing her battle attire and drawing her blade. This time, she dashed forward, moving with a speed far exceeding that of any human. Jeremiah drew his gun and fired a few shots, but with each shot, his target dashed to the side, or moved around. But with each missed shot, he would have a vision of the opposite—a vision of his blow bringing his opponent to the ground. Sometimes he would see himself standing by the edge, casting her over the edge. Sometimes he would see himself dismembering her, spilling holy water upon her body, using a ritual of sealing, or otherwise putting a final end. He would see himself cut, as well, though never fatally. It was, rather, as though his opponent was taunting him. In the end, though, the center-point always remained that moment from less than a minute back, of him standing and drawing his weapon.

Jeremiah gritted his teeth, as she closed in on him, swinging her blade. He dodged, and leaped back himself, with the ground cracking slightly under his feet as he launched himself back. His hat, caught by a blow that would have taken his neck, was not so lucky, leaving his long, graying brown hair free to move in the

air. He raised his arm to fire once more, only to find himself out of ammo.

Seeing his display, Natalia stopped to laugh, and declared, “Why, such a display of strength! And yet you call yourself human?”

Staring back at her, he reached into a pocket of his coat, pulling out the jawbone of a donkey and displaying it. Then, setting the thing back, he replied simply, “With a donkey’s jawbone, I have killed a thousand men.”

“A form of logician technique, then? No, you seem more content with calling upon ancient text as your self-hypnosis. Why, that would almost make you more of a magician than, would it not? Can you play any more magic tricks?”

“You speak of tricks, as though that is not your favored technique. But I have the measure of you, vampire.”

“Oh? And what do you think that is?”

“You are looking into my mind to predict my actions. You change your movements, and change the sequence. That is how you are able to avoid my shots. The stories of your power, all that you have done—it’s nothing but a mere illusion. If I can truly land a shot on you, one that you do not predict, then you will die just as well as your lesser kin. Easier, perhaps, than many.”

His eyes blazed with an inner fire as he made his judgment call. She, in turn, raised her hand up to her mouth, and made a wicked smile as she said, “Oh? Is that the conclusion you came to, then? I suppose it an easy enough explanation, one that a human can handle. But it is not quite the full picture. Most humans, in your position, would not even maintain fragments of their memories. You are quite impressive, to have even that much. However, it is not the same for me. Each projection you see, each rush forward, I experience in full. This battle has been mere seconds for you. For me, it has been a long and entertaining dance, and one in which you have claimed many victories.”

She raised her sword before her, with her left hand rising up to touch the blade itself, before saying, “But you know, there’s only so long I can stick to this basic sword-play. Shall I show

you, then the wielder of a demonic sword, shaped from the demon king's own spinal cord?"

Blue flames danced around the sword as she held it aloft, calling out, "Ashen Gate—Open! Format: Multi-Edged Striking Blade of the Legion, output 7, variant: glass. Manifest."

In the air behind her the air glowed with various glyphs, taking a form not unlike that of a great gate. The sword in her hand shifted, the crystal-like blade warping into something with seven separate blades. As she moved it, it seemed as if the blade both moved and remained still, multiple times over. Each stepped away, in turn, so that before Jeremiah there now stood seven different Natalia's, each a perfect mirror in all respects save the slight variances in their seven swords, each of which had inherited a different spike.

She made no additional comment, for the moment. From each side, the seven swords-women all rushed Jeremiah. He took a deep breath, and exhaled, closing his eyes and saying, "Blessed be the Lord my strength which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight."

The first Natalia came in. Jeremiah ducked down, drawing his weapon and firing. The charging vampire shattered apart like a shattered stain glass window, the fragments breaking apart. Such was what he imagined in his mind's eye, for in that moment, his eyes remained closed. With his mind free to be pillaged by the monster before him, there was no choice, in this moment, but to rely on the true strength of his faith. So as the first was destroyed, he rolled to the side, tossing his first weapon aside and drawing two more from his coat.

His body moved on its own, guided by the purity of faith, which had been refined over decades of seemingly endless battle against the worst monsters mankind had created. His arms raised and he fired off another shot, which was followed by yet another shattering of glass. A third shot, then, as he stepped aside to evade another blow. The next blow he could not evade, instead, throwing his arm up. Yet that blade, which could have struck through solid steel with ease, was caught on the mere fab-

ric of his coat. He opened his eyes, then, facing his opponent as he said, "But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head."

Facing the projection of Natalia, he raised his off-hand gun and blasted her, shattering another. Four shots had been fired, and now, only three stood before him where there had been seven. He raised his arms and began firing at one, who darted back and forth, evading each shot with greater care than the others hand. Soon enough, his bullets ran dry once more. At almost that exact moment, the other two came from him, swinging on each side. He hurled one of his guns at the one, causing her to stumble back, and the second at the other, who evaded and went to swing at him. In response he stepped aside and, with his bare fist, struck her in the arm with enough force that she immediately dropped her sword. His hand grasped her, then pulled her in close before snapping her neck.

The one who had been struck by the gun, now recovered, darted in with her sword as he reached in with her. He fainted to the side, drawing her away before rapidly closing in. The raw force of that punch, thrown with enough speed to shatter the sound barrier, sent fragments of the broken Natalia projection flying across the tower's top. He turned, then, to the last one remaining, who was keeping her distance.

"You have more than demonstrated your might," she said. "But is such brute force the limit of what you can manage?"

She raised her blade again, and said, "Ashen Gate—Reset! Output: 216. Recall!"

Upon her saying this, the air again shimmered before her, as a new duplicate appeared. Then, another. The air around the tower shimmered. Before each mirror-image took form, Jeremiah could see himself in its reflection, as though he stood in the midst of a vast house of mirror. True to the call of the ashen gate, two hundred sixteen Natalia's stood atop the tower, each carrying a perfect replica of the demonic sword she held. They were fragile things, but that fragility meant nothing here, for a single strike from his fist would surely end the true thing with

just as much ease as the duplicates.

This time, the force came at him from all sides, and not all by means of the blade. Some, with the same ease as the original, worked to call from the gate. In the sky a cloud of ash steadily formed, from which they called down blasts of fire or lightning, and powerful winds beside. Lines of power ran along the ground, forcing him to evade as the tower's surface was turned into razor-sharp spikes upon which to impale him. But even against this threat, his countenance betrayed no fear. There was only that stubborn will which had drive him his far, and which continued to drive him to press forward. With each evasive movement, he soon launched himself into another attack, his body ripping through the air like a meteorite and bringing him to each foe. In some cases, his fist would shatter through one Natalia, and bring down a second with the follow-through.

It was a difficult battle—no, perhaps an impossible one. And yet in spite of those terrible odds, Jeremiah felt it less hopeless than the beginning. For his mind was no longer plagued by those strange flashes, as Natalia had from the start. The overwhelming power she called upon, it seemed, could not be called on at the same time as the cheat-like technique. Was it a function of her Ashen Gate? Or something else entirely? That much he could not say, only that, at least for the moment, there existed a chance. Yet to see it materialize would surely not be an easy task.

A series of blades struck through the sky, and the ground gave way beneath him, causing him to stumble and fall back. Six attackers came upon him, and he lunged forward, with his fist piercing through one. As he did, though, he found it shattered not to glass, but was instead like a thick mud, which held him tightly in place. The other attackers, from all sides, turned their blades to pierce him, ripping through his coat clothes and penetrating into his skin. Tatters of paper and cloth fell about as they did so, each bit inscribed with holy texts, and holy protection.

He coughed, and blood came out from his mouth. A normal man, surely, should be dead—and yet, though the blades had struck him, none had fully pierced his vitals. The Natalia mir-

rors pulled the blades back, to find none had pierce deeper than perhaps an inch. And so he said, "This time I shall be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!"

The air around him began to heat up, with a pulse of flames suddenly spreading out, driving his enemy to scatter. He lowered the cloak he wore from his body, revealing a body that, though no longer in its prime, stood at the pinnacle of human power. It was muscular, incredibly strong, and covered in the scars of a hundred battles or more, all of which singly might have felled a man of lesser willpower. His long hair fell free as he took a step forward, and then another, stomping the ground and causing the very foundations of the tower to shake.

In the next moment, the flames about him began to take on new shapes. Where there were over two hundred Natalia's atop the tower, now, darting out one at a time from below his feet, with three hundred foxes made of blazing fire, moving tightly as pairs to attack each of the duplicates. In terms of strength, they were little greater than a proper fox, and far less ferocious than any beasts of the day. Yet it was not a matter of the strength of beasts that determined this battle, which pitted them against the mirror army of vampire queens arrayed against them. It was the purest manifestation of that power which tools such as the ashen gate actualized—it was a battle of willpower. The drive to survive, and to accomplish this task, regardless of what it might cost. So did Jeremiah and Natalia clash, a horde of flaming foxes, against a horde of sword-wielding vampires.

The raging battle continued for what felt like an eternity, until at last, a lone Natalia and a lone Jeremiah remained. Both stood exhausted, and clearly marked by the slashing of blades and claws, and the fire and storm from which they could both call upon. And besides them, there was one other who could be seen—the lone remaining fox, seated by Jeremiah's feet, which faded away like the flicker of a candle as he stepped forward.

"Do you think yourself victorious, then?" she replied.

"No," he answered. "For it is God who grants me strength, and He who is the victor."

With a frown, she looked to him and said, “Your faith is certainly something, but do not be so easily misled. There is no God answering your prayers, human. That you may call upon the power of a gate by another incantation is a testament to your own willpower, and the skill of your forefathers to create it. Were you to understand this, you could ascend to be far more.”

“You are not the first to say such a thing. And I tell you this, monster, though you cannot hope to understand it—such things do not matter. It is by the will of God that I serve as his right hand, and I care not the means by which he delivers his judgment. I am his Judge, and his last Prophet, and in His name I will do what I must. To maintain the Ashen Gate as you have must have mentally drained you to the last. Have you last words to speak, here, at the end?”

“Hmm...Look out, behind you!”

“What are you, five year—!?”

But the treachery was not as it seemed, for indeed, there was somebody behind him. Natalia came from behind, this time, the blade of her sword shaped into a single dagger. With one hand she grasped his hair, pulling it down, as with the other she pulled the blade to rip it apart. He pulled back with all his might, and yet unlike before, there was no great force which could tear at the power. It was only the normal might of a man, no longer carrying with him the great blessings of on high.

The Natalia who had appeared by surprise curled her lips into a wicked smile, as she held the great mass of hair in her hand. The other, to which Jeremiah had been speaking to, steadily broke apart like fragments of broken glass. She spoke to him, “You made a mistake, in closing your eyes, human. For when I first called upon the power of the gate, your third shot did not reach me. While you spent yourself playing with my mirror images, I watched, and waited, for the perfect moment when you would be vulnerable enough.”

Casually, she tossed the hair aside. The winds blowing across the tower caught it, scattering the strands which had so long been bound together.

“Ten and two thousand years, human. You stand now at the closing of an eon, watching to see how the Earth shall once again be born anew. But I was there from the beginning. I presided over the closing of the past age, and I shall do so, again, regardless of what you might do. You might think that you carry the will of a hundred men or more within you, but what of it? A single generation cannot hope to stand against the full weight of history. Can you imagine the feeling of looking to the night sky, human, and no longer seeing the night sky under which you were born? To see how those you have fought beside change, into people you can no longer recognize? To know that you, yourself, have been lost under the weight of lifetimes of memories?”

“You expect pity from me, monster, after the horrors you have inflicted upon so many lives? No, monster. I have none to share.”

“Monster. Hmm.”

She looked away from out, turning her gaze out to the horizon. “How many times can one hear such a phrase, do you think? The moment I was awakened to this state, human, I was told that I was a weapon. That though I had died, by means of the old sciences, I had been brought forth. That I, along with the other ash-generals, had in that state between life and death touched upon the Ashen Gate, and could be the instrument to bring about salvation. To persist past the point of war—to choose not to be weapons, but rulers, even if it made monsters of us. Was that so wrong?”

“Look to the ground below, and see the result for yourself,” he replied.

“I have,” she said. “I have seen it far more than you could know. The cataclysm below did not come about in a single night. Yet by the time I could see it, there was nothing left to do but wait. To wait, and to prepare for what was to come.”

At last, she turned to him again and said, “You were a fool to think I knew not the source of your power. I am Natalia Evening-Chronicle, the Ruins Queen, once the High Archivist of the Ash Legion. There is no text remaining on this planet that I am not

familiar with, nor would I, knowing of your coming, not have worked to uncover your weaknesses. The strength of Samson you have thus invoked, and by your will, gained the strength of an army, and skin so near to invulnerable that even a demonic blade could barely hope to pierce you. Yet by a woman's treachery, he was bereft of his strength, and given unto his enemies. Prepare yourself, human, to experience that same fate."

Natalia raised her blade high, and called out again, "Ashen Gate—Open! Format: End of Era Storm Call, output 9999, variant: anti-world."

The demonic sword in her hand vanished, shooting into the sky like a bolt of lightning. In the skies above, where the dark clouds of ash had gathered, it began to spread, marking the beginning of a great storm. The winds howled and tower shook, and in the air behind Natalia, the great Ashen Gate manifested. Where before it stood closed, this time, it was fully open. Darkened ash came forth from it, swirling around Natalia and stretching out past Jeremiah. Were the world not already consumed by flame, an onlooker might well think that this oncoming storm, in all of its might and majesty, marked the final coming of an apocalypse. Nor would any seeing such a marvel expect to see Jeremiah, bereft of his great strength, his mind exhausted, nevertheless holding firm.

Yet that was exactly what he did. For though the strength of the great judge of old had left him, that man, Father Jeremiah, had not declared such a title as the extent. For such a title, as might as it might seem, could only be seen as a limiter for a man of his faith. To be a judge, as he had stated, was to declare oneself as presiding over a darker, fallen age, where men inflicted the worst of horrors upon each other, and no kings righteous or cruel sat upon the throne. Whatever might be said of this age, where the world itself was on fire, it was not such an age. For though she presided over naught but ruins, and help not the divine mandate of heaven, there existed atop this tower a final queen of the world. And it was not the duty of a judge to speak of divine justice to the king.

With an assurance granted only by the strongest of faith, Jeremiah strode forward and spoke, *“And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God.”*

Natalia, with that same confidence, lowered her hand and directed it at Jeremiah, while bringing her own incantation to a close with that final word, “Manifest!”

“And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them.”

The moment Jeremiah uttered the words, Natalia stopped, as though time itself was stopped for her. Then, across her body, a dozen cuts appeared, ripping through her clothing and skin, and causing a horrific spray of blood to shoot out in all directions. She cried out in pain, dropping down to the ground, and clutching her body. No individual wound was fatal, and nearly as soon as they were made, her vampiric regeneration began to do its work of knitting them together. But the pain, that was a very different matter. Pain unlike that which she had felt for centuries, the suffering of a hundred priests to a false god, all placed upon her in the span of a moment. Yet in spite of it all, even as she was forced to catch herself in part with her off hand, she did not allow her knees to touch the ground. For though the suffering she felt was great, her pride, even then, would not allow herself such a disgrace.

While she began to recover, the clattering of a stone against metal could be heard, as Jeremiah reached into his pants pocket and tossed a mesh bag with twelve clattering rocks. Gritting her teeth, she looked up from the stone to the man, before standing and saying, “You have interrupted the Ashen Gate? How did you manage to contrive such a thing, human?”

“Before coming to this tower, I prepared twelve stones,” he replied, “From which each of these fragments was taken. Each I placed around the base, to make this an altar. Thrice along the way, along my ascent, I poured forth water. Each of these things I did in preparation, knowing that I would face both your power and your treachery. No god will answer your call, nor will

any power come to you from the gate. For now you face the full majesty of the divine.”

With his arms extended wide, he spoke with the great might of an ancient prophet, calling forth the words, *“Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.”*

The swirl of dust overhead began to glow, and the strength of the winds below picked up, with such an intensity of howling that none like it had ever been heard upon the Old Earth for ten thousand years or more. In the skies above, a cataclysmic power grew, shaking the very pillars of heaven with the raw power of the elements—of fire and lightning, and those other things by which divine judgment was often rendered—to a magnitude far beyond even that which Natalia had contrived with her own apocalyptic incantation.

Looking up above, rather than despair, she simply chuckled, saying, “So, you would make this tower an altar, with yourself standing atop it? Your resolve is admirable, human. But let us see if you truly understand the magnitude of what you have wrought.”

The clouds above were blown away, and where the moon should have shone in the sky, there was a vast expanse of light like that of the sky. The roaring winds were joined by the crashing sounds like the sea, as though, at the base of the tower, the great deluge had returned to the Earth to consume it. Flaming spheres fell from the heavens like long tongues of fire, striking the tower which had until now been safe, with each strike blasting away at the ancient metal and stone. As the Earth itself shook, fragments from along the side fell away. In the midst of this great unraveling of man’s creation, Father Jeremiah looked to Natalia and said, “So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.”

The sound of the heavens being rent apart resounded across the land, as from the sky above the came a great bolt of lightning. Never before had such a bolt been seen on the Old Earth, nor would such a thing likely be seen on any that might follow.

Upon the tower that bolt of lightning came, and the tower, for all its strength, all the sciences that had gone into making it, was powerless to resist. For it was not mere electric power which struck its surface, but rather, it was all that such a bolt symbolized in the hearts of mankind, all the way back to those distant days when the first men, clothed only in that which they were born with upon leaving their mother's womb, looked upon those bolts from the skies above and named it the work of a divine power far exceeding their own. It was power, primordial and pure, and crafted with the sole purpose of bringing about destruction. Where it struck, the side of the tower was blasted apart, striking all the way down its core and to the vast tangle of wires and tubes around which it was built. With that single strike, that tower, which had been old even when its undying mistress still lived as a moral woman, was undone.

The two small figures which stood atop the vast tower were not spared from the destruction. As the top collapsed the two of them, man and woman, both came tumbling down along with it. None walked astride the surface of the planet below to see them, nor were there any who might help them. Along the long fall, Natalia considered her options. Had she access to her Ashen Gate, surely there was some technique which might aid her in cushioning the fall! Yet with the Gate sealed, no such technique could be called upon. Nor, like her predecessors, could she simply turn into a bat and fly away. There exist nothing which she might do save allow herself to fall, alongside that man, who had resolved to die along with her. Falling not far from her, he did so gracefully, his eyes closed, and prayers upon his lips as he spoke to the God in whom he believed.

From the top of the world they fell, accelerating, as dictated by that universal law of gravity which had remained unchanged since Newton had first contemplated such things, at nine point eight meters per second. Down to the Earth below they fell, and she, her face below the tower cleansed of the flames and left as but smoke and ash, smiled to welcome them. What sound they made upon striking the ground would, surely, be a horrendous

thing, though none could possibly hear it. For so perfect was the timing of their falls that each met the Earth at the same time, and in that moment, was confronted with what should we have been oblivion.

And yet though blackness came upon them, the mutual oblivion that might have been did not come. For Father Jeremiah, who had resolved himself to such a fate, awoke to find himself in the midst of a bed of ashes upon the ground. His body, sore and battered, remained intact, in defiance of all that might be said about human limits. As he moved, slowly, attempting to pull himself up, he looked forward to see that he was no alone in his survival. For in the midst of the ashen waste, a swirling dark cloud pulled itself together, taking the form of the all the more appropriately titled Queen of Ruins, Natalia Evening-Chronicle. She wore neither her black dress nor her battle dress, but stood clad only in the dark wisps of smoke, which preserved only the barest sense of a modesty which she herself had lost any care within the first millennia of her long life.

Jeremiah attempted to pull himself further, but found himself unable to. Though he was, by some miracle, alive, it seemed that was about all he could say. His muscles, he could tell, were largely all but destroyed, and fractures ran along each bone in his body. That he could move, or breathe, was more a matter of his mind than the crude matter of his body. But though it pained him, he nevertheless made the effort to speak, noting, "It would seem that this is the end. If you intend to see me to God, monster, then do so swiftly. For once my strength has returned, I shall bring you to an end."

In the reflection of her blood-red eyes, he could see the faintest impression of himself. His body was bloodied, battered—though he could not feel it, it seemed that, at least in some parts, his bones were sticking out. He dreaded to know what lay beneath his left arm, which he found he could not even move, while also doubting he would ever get to learn. Yet the vampire queen who stood before him did not advance forward, instead looking down at him with a neutral expression that

betrayed no hint at her pride, nor anything else beyond.

“That will be unnecessary,” she replied, “For though I had declared that I would take with your life your blood, and cast you from atop the tower above, it seems neither is an option. So utter was the destruction of my body in striking the Earth that even regeneration can render me as little more than this—a wraith of ash and dust. Broken you already are, and by a fall of your own devising. Take pride, human. You have done what none other has in ten and two thousand years.”

“Pride? I can feel no pride in this. For I, too, am now but a broken man. And you, who shall live past the point that I can return myself to life, survive still. How might I feel pride, knowing that all I have worked for has been for nothing?”

“With the tower destroyed, and the information with it, the ancient sciences will be lost. This eon, however long it might last, shall progress without their touch. In time the fires will die down, and the survivors will walk upon the surface. When the last remnants of their technology fail them, they will walk about, as their ancient ancestors did, hunting the surviving beasts of the Earth with bow and spear. It will be a hard life—harder than any that he we given them—but it will be their journey to take. And it is one I have no interest in guiding them upon.”

“A creature like you, which feeds on human blood, cannot remain passively on the sidelines. Like a predator, you will stalk them—an eternal mark of my failures.”

“Must you be so dramatic? For all you know, I plan only to stalk humans at the very end of their lives, or who are set to die anyways. I am not a glutton...”

Those words, said with a strong hint of annoyance, betrayed honest thoughts unlike any she had yet said. Though far from comforted by them, Jeremiah Stonefield, the broken man lying at the base of the tower, caught that same hint, and pondered it. No longer could be hope to meet his objective. It was a terrible thing, and yet, in that moment, he also felt it gave him a new sort of mental freedom. The freedom to listen to his opponent, who had plummeted alongside him, and the freedom to wonder what

she spoke was truth, and what was mere deception. And so, with such curiosity coming upon him, he asked her the question, "Tell me—why I am alive?"

"Is it not obvious?" she asked. "You staked this whole gambit of yours on bringing us both to a mutual destruction. But this manifestation of will, which you might call a miracle, works both ways. For so long as I survived the fall, so, too, would your body survive. Whereas this 'Samson' you called upon died in crashing a tower down upon his enemies, in a last feat of superhuman strength, your will has given you another chance. But if you should stand again? That is a separate question."

"I will," he replied, "So long as the Lord wills it. So, too, shall I mediate upon what he intends by my survival, or by your own."

"There is no higher meaning to be found in survival, human. Nor in death."

"It is by that way of thinking that the world burns around us. Man exists in this world to give glory to our creator. But we have strayed, from His laws, and from our rightful place."

"Those words are not your own," she replied. "They are words that were given to you. Human, did you not wonder why I ceased relying upon my prediction?"

"A simple answer—you could not use it while wielding that sword."

"In rapid succession, that is true. But let me ask you another question. *How far in advance do you think I could actually see?*"

That question, which hung in the air for some time, was one that he had no answer for. Nor had he given any thought to consider it. That he was still alive implied some limit, and that she was looking in his mind, that his presence was in some degree required. Yet not that it had been asked, he begun to wonder what it was she truly meant.

"The true answer, human, is not what you think. Since the moment I was brought from death, the power I have carried from the ash is the Blood of Cassandra. And its full span is not, as you might think, a matter of seconds. It is the power to live through the events of one hundred years. For you, human, you have ded-

icated your entire life to destroy my kin. Yet the first time we met atop that tower, was over one hundred iterations in the past. For though my life might be measured in a mere ten and two thousand thousands years, the span of my mind measures ten and two thousand million. In spite of it all, I had no means of knowing that at the edge of that awareness, that the events leading to this grand inferno had long before been set in motion. No means could be found to prevent it. So instead, I chose a different path. I would set things into motion, such that I might be avenged.”

Looking to Jeremiah, she said, “The earliest form of you carried a different, more complete holy book. It was of the same sort—a text of faith, from back in the 3rd Eon, and from the same mythic template upon which our Ashen Gate was built. For that reason, it was a tool well-suited to dealing with our kind. When first I saw you, your willpower was apparent at once. But it was tempered by notions such as love, and mercy. So I traced back the records of your existence. I stripped bare those texts to their predecessors, of the 2nd Eon, and ensured the right information would reach you. All so that I might have you exterminate my own kin, born from the same Gate.”

In the furthers corners of her mind she could remember him. In a world where she had never moved off her throne, that Jeremiah, who had confronted her atop the tower, had shone brighter than any other. But a saintly man who would not act until the flames had burned out could not have been the weapon she needed. So she, the Evening-Chronicle, had become like the treacherous morning star and set him on a lifetime of war, waged for the sake of mankind against a legion of vampires.

“Such a preposterous thing to say...”

“The namesake of my power of blood often heard such things, I understand. To see what lies in the future, it is a curse upon the one who bears it. To have no means of changing it, a curse even greater still. So much have I seen, and so much of it futile, that even my sense of self is as thin as this ashen body of mine. And I have tired, human, of this unending game of writing and following scripts for my own life, as a pawn of my own making.

I had tired a long time ago. More than a thousand years before your birth, I was tired, and had thought it best to live atop this tower as all but a lobotomine, the years passed idly as I saw into futures that would never be my own.”

In that moment, Jeremiah understood the meaning of his potential deaths. That the woman who stood before him, in her repeats, had no doubt seen a dozen ways or more to ensure his defeat. So why, by choosing to instead call upon the power of her Ashen Gate, had she opened up the possibility for things to go against her expectations? Why had she allowed herself to slip? He could not hope to fully understand the burden of ten and two thousand million years of memories, but he could understand, after such an eternity, that a certain part of her simply desired to see an end.

At this realization he laughed, and said, “You should consider faith, monster.”

“A strange thing to say, I think. By what logic would make me a convert?”

“In this battle, as I have set myself before the judgment of the Lord, so too did you offer your own fate to Him—or, perhaps to your, it may be better to say to the whims of fate and chance. Have you truly not considered that He may well have guided your heart to this? That this power you claim, from this vision, is not something which has blinded you from the truth that is faith? Or that when you saw this other self of mine, who might have stood here instead of me had you not intervened, that it was His will to have you awakened, and bring about his just vengeance?”

“And you would call my words preposterous? Hah. No, human, I have no need for a faith that would make me such a pawn to the world. What I have chosen, I have chosen of my own, free will, and it is by the same will that I shall pass as a wraith along the edge of the next phase of history. Until the end of this eon, the beginning of the next, for as many times as needed. No need have I for faith in powers from the world beyond, for I am Natalia Evening-Chronicle, the Ruins Queen, who returned from death to help slay the King of Demons which mankind had so foolishly

brought into being. Should such a being as 'God' exist beyond this material world, past each of the Gates Unseen, then I should well like to meet him, and slay him all the same."

"Your words are as blasphemous as your existence. I pity you, monster. But now, at least, I do understand you. For like Cain, your bloodstained hands have cursed you to wander in suffering. Once, I had thought your destruction only a matter of protecting mankind. Now I wonder if such a thing might be a mercy upon you, more than anything else."

"Should such a thing come, it will be by the hands of another, human. For even should you seek me, you shall not find me. For the Earth is vast, and the skies above far wider still. Spend the rest of your life in search, and a thousand generations beyond that, and you will not find me. Do as your book says. Go forth, be fruitful, and multiply."

With those words, Natalia's ashen form began to break apart. Looking at herself, she said, "It seems this is the limit. I suppose I shall allow the wind to carry me, then."

No more words were said, then. Jeremiah Stonefield watched as the ash was carried away. His mind turned now to his own, broken body. In spite of his words, he was not confident that he would be able to truly pull himself up from that stone. Nor, knowing what had been said, was he sure of his own resolve to do so. But prayer, at least, he could do.

His eyes turned up to the sky above. The tower, which had once dominated the landscape, was gone. Yet the moon, that great glowing orb in the sky, remained even in its battered state as a constant companion, casting its pale light upon his face. He contemplated that beautiful sphere for some time, as well, and on the sun from which it had borrowed its light, and all the stars in the sky and those people who might remain on the Earth below. And from that sky, as well, he reflected upon a flickering light, in the sky above, which seemed to gradually grow brighter as it drew closer. Was it a trick of his eye that he saw, descending to the ground below? An escape pod descending from orbit below, or a rescue ship sent on high to inspect what remained of the

tower below? A satellite which had lost its control station, and begun a descent? Some monster of human creation, unknown to himself, on search for prey to harvest? Or was it an angel, sent from on high to bring him up?

He closed his eyes, and allowed the warm night air to blow across his face. He reflected on the life that he had lived, and on the powers that had guided it to where he was. And when at last he opened his eyes again, he smiled at what he saw.