

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Promise of the Child

Written by Tom Toner

Published by Gollancz

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.



THE PROMISE OF THE CHILD

Volume One of The Amaranthine Spectrum

TOM TONER

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

Copyright © Tom Toner 2015

All rights reserved

The right of Tom Toner to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Gollancz
An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment, London EC4Y 0DZ
An Hachette UK Company

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 473 21136 0

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset at The Spartan Press Ltd,
Lymington, Hants

Printed and bound by the CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CRO 4YY

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.



www.orionbooks.co.uk
www.gollancz.co.uk

‘Smiles form the channels of a future tear.’

Byron

‘It was true that as one watched life in its curious crucible of pain and pleasure, one could not wear over one’s face a mask of glass, nor keep the sulphurous fumes from troubling the brain and making the imagination turbid with monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams.’

Oscar Wilde

PROLOGUE

Praba: 1319

Eliška watched the rain outside while she waited, the window-panes already misted with the steam from her sodden furs. The chestnut leaves brushing the glass were a rich emerald green against the dark sky, fat and luscious from a fourth summer of unceasing rain. Somewhere in the square a pedlar was shouting, his calls softened by the downpour.

She let her eyes wander to the desk before her, carved from light wood and heaped with papers. Thick black and red seals of office dangled from some like dried scabs, snapped where the knife had slit them. If she stood from her chair she might perhaps see some of what was written, but she knew better than to think of disturbing anything on that wide table, instead looking to the shelves, her eyes settling on the fireplace. The dank day made it feel much later than it was, but the flagstones in the hearth were clean and swept, the andirons resting on them still unused. There would be no fire tonight in this fine, high-ceilinged room, not even if its master worked at his desk until morning.

On her walk across the mostly deserted Judith Bridge, she had seen a woman leaning against the parapet, vomiting into the swollen river. Two stray hounds on the far side had stopped in the driving rain to watch her with ears pricked, their eyes bright. Eliška had hurried on, her escort clapping his hands to shoo the animals. The dog packs had a taste for children, but it couldn't be long before they started after

larger prey in this starving city. People blamed the rotten meat thrown into the shambles for encouraging the packs, and perhaps soon they'd need to be hunted in the narrow streets like boar in a woodland.

Hearing the muffled bells of St Vitus sounding across the Mesto, she looked back to the window, watching the scrape of damp leaves against the glass.

'Princess.'

The voice in her ear was pleasant, conversational, but she gasped nonetheless.

'Do not stand,' the man pleaded, holding out a ringed hand and smiling down at her look of alarm. He glanced over her furs and tutted. 'You are wet.'

'*Bonjour à vous*, Aaron,' said Eliška softly, composing herself and running a hand over the fur at her throat. She knew it pleased him when she practised. 'I walked.'

Her husband's principal exchequer, acting ruler of Bohemia in all but name, nodded and smiled brightly, glancing out at the square. 'I would have sent someone if you'd written ahead.' He went to his desk and papers, sparing them a cursory glance before moving to the window. Eliška knew the glance was contrived to be casual, but those eyes took in everything; they'd have spotted a single moved or shuffled document, any item out of place. Not for the first time, she wondered if it might be a test, leaving his private correspondence for all to see while they waited in his office, and whether the sheaves of paper were even important at all.

At the window, the man stopped, taking in the view between the trees. 'Praha looks splendid even in this rain, don't you think?' He turned to her, that face always somehow difficult to recall, kind and avuncular, just beginning to run to fat from years of sitting behind great tables.

'As lovely as Paris?' she asked him, trying her best to smile.

He laughed lightly, a breath from his nostrils. 'Very nearly.'

Her eyes lowered to the newest chains of office around his

shoulders, globular garnets winking from their links. John had rewarded his adviser well for his years of service, as had his father before him. The town house he kept on Seminárská was no indication of Aaron's true wealth – the man could have had a palace carved from blue Carrara marble or splendid quarters in the castle on the hill if he so chose – but this modest building had served as the adviser's sole residence since her husband's coronation in 1310, before the years of famine and damp had scoured the city.

'They say the rain will continue all summer,' she said, sitting back in her chair and watching his reflection in the glass as their eyes met. 'But Gascony and Aragon will be spared this year.'

Aaron's reflection continued to watch her, a spirit peering in at her from the window. He shook his head.

'Not England. I have a letter from King Edward; he writes that there was no bread for him with his supper when he stopped at one of his towns in June. No bread for their own *king*. Bohemia is not yet that desperate.'

Bohemia. Perhaps when it is, you shall take your leave.

Eliška glanced to the thickly embroidered rug covering most of the pale floorboards beneath her chair, as if in contemplation. There might be letters from more illustrious men than Edward on that table, had she the courage to look earlier. A certain Pierre, a friend of Aaron's and a fellow Frenchman, wrote to him often. Pierre went also by the name of Pope Clement, when it pleased him.

'Have you been there? To England?' she asked, gesturing with a nod to the table and its clutter.

Aaron's eyes followed hers to the table. 'Not for years and years, Princess – though I would venture to say it was a finer place when I did, under the rule of his father.' He raised a hand above his head briefly. 'Tall men are often more adept at governance, for some reason, and the Scot Hammer was exceedingly tall.'

Eliška had travelled abroad just the once, to meet her new husband at Luxembourg when she was barely fourteen; Aaron himself – fresh from assisting the Emperor in the wars against Florence – had arranged the union, and she remembered at first quite enjoying his company in a foreign court of strangers so far from home. He had made her feel safe, always sparing her the time to talk in confidence, no matter what the hour, and sometimes even making her laugh at a point in her life when she had thought she could not. Indeed, as she looked around the chamber, it occurred to her that there might be nowhere in the land safer than where she sat now, in this rain-battered town house. Thieves and rapists roamed the outlying districts of the city and her days finished well before the sun had set. Even her lonely rooms in the castle might not be nearly so impregnable as this dark chamber with its lingering stink of wax and varnish. Anyone at court could tell you who really ruled the city, but those who valued their noses kept their mouths shut and their eyes closed. They said Aaron the Jew kept no lovers, that he never slept; some claimed he seldom ate a morsel, the whispers among the diplomats he entertained monthly suggesting that he did not even deign to *touch* things. Eliška's eyes still went to the man's hands – pale and long and veined with blue – whenever they met, despite her best efforts. The more she thought about it, the more ridiculous such whispers sounded, as if her husband's court were filled with children. Of course she had seen him eat, and drink. He had touched her shoulder just then, had he not? She couldn't remember.

Whatever the prejudices against the king's secretive atheling, his statesmanship and vision were legendary, and under his guidance Praha was promising to rival Rome one day as a seat of enlightenment. Heaps of silver Groschens stamped with the collared lion of Bohemia tumbled in daily from principalities as far flung as Berlin and Frankfurt as the city vied to become, against the designs of countless kings

and princes, capital of the whole empire. The princess might even admit – privately, of course – that her husband’s absence barely obstructed Aaron’s designs at all. Unlike John, the softly spoken chancellor seemed to live for his adopted city, and as far as Eliška knew, Aaron hadn’t left it since her father-in-law the Emperor’s death in Buonconvento a few years before.

But she was not so naive as people thought, this princess, with her round, mole-speckled face and sleepy eyes. If Aaron came and went at leisure, or kept many wives, or visited all the brothels in the Holy Roman Empire, nobody would ever know. As with the affairs of state, he managed his own business behind bolted doors and heavy tapestries, in cold chambers where no fire blazed in the hearth.

He was watching her again when she looked back to the window.

‘And so you are here to discuss Václav, Princess.’ He looked at her properly at last. ‘Begin.’

Eliška felt a blush rise to her ears. She had tried to keep something from this man and he had embarrassed her – albeit momentarily – for it.

‘Yes,’ she admitted. ‘My son is unwell.’

Aaron nodded as if it were old, familiar news, his eyes going to the floorboards at his feet. ‘As I said, you ought to have written in advance – I am busy today.’

‘You could come tomorrow.’ She heard the young girl in her voice as she spoke but no longer cared. ‘Can you?’ She kept her gaze on her hands, feeling his stare running the length of her body.

‘Yes, perhaps.’ He sighed. ‘In the afternoon. Don’t let any physicians touch him until I am there.’

She glanced at him, relief fading the blush. Whether good magic or bad, she was glad of the chance of it. ‘Your ... payment this time, Aaron?’

The man turned his head briefly to think, a few strands of iron-grey, thinning hair catching the day-dark light. There

were no moles on his chalky skin or blemishes of any kind save the creases around his eyes. 'He's to come here a year earlier than we agreed. When he is seven. I may choose to take the prince travelling with me.' Aaron looked sharply back at her. 'Are we agreed?'

A year earlier was small coin. Eliška knew her reputation as a methodical, industrious girl, and knew she had no choice. She would lose her son either way.

'He is yours, Aaron. Bring him back to me when he is great.'

Aaron smiled broadly, his eyes suddenly kind. 'The *greatest*, or not at all.'

Chapel

A white chapel guarded the tiny crescent port, looking north-west to the strait between the islands and into the deep blue waterway where the fishing boats came in. Sotiris only remembered the building from the front, never from any approaching angle. Shallow stone steps led downwards from its locked door to the urchin-caked rock beneath, sinking into the darkness of the sea. He had never seen inside; the single square window was always too grubby and the Ionian light too bright, even at sunset. Only smudges of colour revealed themselves if he looked away across the water, back to the port. Pale blobs of yachts or catamarans bobbed, becoming clear only for an instant before memories of their form were muddled by all the intervening time, and houses on the harbour-side were little more than far-off parcels of yellow and white and pistachio green.

The chapel was one of the places his mind took him on walks, guiding him along the grassy hillside that fizzed with twilight cicadas and down to the locked door. When he tried

to look up at the side of the building, gaps in the recollection pulled him quietly to its front. Memory was crude, cubist, unyielding.

The chapel and its island had become a sort of stage, a setting upon which things he sometimes read and heard could play out in his mind. He didn't know if other people thought like this and it had never occurred to him to ask.

Sotiris's remembered walks to the chapel were almost certainly more fiction than anything else. The memories were pickled, viewed through the oily layer of whatever preserved them, altering their colour, texture, even their form. But they had fared well, considering. He counted again, briefly. Those memories of the chapel were almost twelve and a half thousand years old.

A tourist boat with an outboard motor glides into view. He should have heard the raw-throated engine – he knows the boat well, even if its shape and colour are vague – but it is strangely silent, as if much further away. The boat passes only a few yards below him in the strait, headed for port. There are people standing on board and he recognises all of them but one: the man at the centre of the group, a glass in his hand.

Sotiris knew perfectly well that he was dreaming, that his sleep had found the well-thumbed scene at the front of his thoughts that night and offered it up once more, but still he was frightened.

He places his hands on the wall, the chapel at his back, and peers over as the vessel passes beneath. The figure is in shade, then obscured by a bunch of yellow parasols they must have found for their guest's arrival. Raising his eyes and staring back to the little coloured blocks of houses beyond the yachts, he keeps thinking, *Why doesn't the boat make any sound?* It's as if it doesn't want to be noticed, perhaps trying to reach the port without any fanfare. But the people at the colourful harbour-side already know it's coming – they're there, they're waiting.

Then the tour boat passes the chapel and leaves the shade, sun warming the parasols and colouring the motor smoke. The depths it's heading into are almost green. He sees the guest again, mingling, charming, carried onwards to Sotiris's island. He glances over his shoulder, the chapel twisting, and wonders if he can run back in time along the hill path to Vathi. It was possible, just about; but the people waiting at the harbour by the rusted bollards and benches and nets would shoo him away like the local leper. They didn't know. Sotiris straightened in his dream, turning from the harbour and trying to wake. The truth was that he really didn't want to be there when the boat came in; he didn't want to see their guest close up.

It wasn't a man, the image that mingled and charmed on the top deck of the boat; that's what those people waiting couldn't understand. It was a mirage, a skilled deception, a glamour. It hadn't come to help them.

Fortress

Through a fog of roving hail the machines dropped, at first nothing but far-off grey specks revealed now and then in the blustery white sky. By the time the colossal brick-red fortress at Nilmuth had noticed their approach, the specks were already angling their descent, the scream of their fall reaching the watchers below. The hundred and five craft fell in a diamond shape, the outermost machines slowing as they reached their target and elongating the formation to a narrow spear. From miles around the descent and attack would look slow, like a flock of ravens mobbing a dying beast, and their speed was only given away by the popping bursts of supersonic detonations impacting through the fleet as they met the highest spires of the fortress.

The first machines, selected for their bulk, detonated as they hit the spires, rupturing stone and metal. The second wave followed a moment later, their beaklike forms burrowing through the next layer of towers and into the depths of the fortress. Bodies and masonry thundered past the third wave of machines, a gulch of flame blackening their already dark hulls as they hit gas tanks and piping. They fell deeper, rigged to explode at a certain depth to allow the passage of the next, more vital wave, eventually blowing apart the inner foundations of the great central spire. The machines that came after were self-powered, bellowing their exhausts through the smoke to slow their descent and extending skinny arms to claw for purchase on the citadel's rock flanks. They lodged in the ruins of the spire, rubble and stone still falling like rain around them, and popped hatches in their undersides to disgorge dozens of tiny figures.

Tzolz glanced up through the dripping sleet at the war machines circling the gaping breach in the fortress, lumps of wet rock the size of horses still falling among his team and denting the reinforced hulls of the landing craft. He checked his spring rifle again, looking around to the assembling mercenaries still funnelling from the hatches, and moved wordlessly through the debris to a ruined corridor, his armour-plated feet crunching over the dismembered bodies of the Vulgar who had lived at this level. Teeth and fleshy shards of bone littered the rubble like seeds, some sticking to the polished metal of his boots.

His squad took point, crowding past him to the edges of the doorway to hurl tiny Oxel scouts. The fairylike Prism species whistled to each other and scampered in, their bulky flight-suits clinking with dangling bomblets. As he waited, Tzolz looked back through the dripping chasm at the vacuum-suited Lacaille knight still sitting in the open hatch of the furthest craft, the heavy helmet making any expression unreadable.

Rusted pipes and chunks of material still dropped like snow into the breach and Tzolz backed further into the doorway.

A series of detonations signalled the depths of the Oxel's explorations and he turned quickly, shaking the moisture from the weapon and hoisting it to his shoulder. Ahead, the dark and smoky corridor had been widened, doorways to adjoining chambers blown in by the tiny scouts, and he diverted two teams in either direction with swift hand movements, taking the central passage himself with three more. Their spies had indicated that the Shell was frequently moved for its security, resting at irregular intervals in an iridium-lined chamber in the guts of the structure. If the agents valued their skins they'd have made their way out of the country to the harbour at Untmouth by now, knowing full well what awaited those who remained in the fortress and the fallow lands surrounding it. Tzolz flicked his lights on, illuminating the rest of the corridor with a caustic white glare that sent shadows bouncing across bare stone walls and elaborate hanging braziers. At the end of the section of corridor there began a succession of spiral ramps once necessary for vehicular access, one of which would take them down into the lower levels. After three ramps they would hit a shaft, the spine of the fortress, where a drilling team was to meet them.

He waited, holding up a gnarled finger. Crude microphones on his breastplate tasted the silence, hearing the distant explorations of his five other teams as they swarmed through the fortress, the grumble of detonations and the groaning of the structure all around them adding to the distant moan of the wind through the chasm at their backs. No conversation between his units was permitted, and so at last he heard them, whispering in their little high-pitched voices. Tzolz allowed himself ten more seconds, finger still raised, understanding Vulgar more than adequately. He pointed slowly at the left-most opening of the many-branched corridor ahead of them and his three mercenaries converged on it, their thin shadows

looming like skeletons across the wall. At the edge of the doorway he turned off his lights and listened to the darkness, the voices – inaudible to a normal Prism ear – louder in his helmet now. He knew exactly where they were.

He unclipped a bomblet from a canister on the belt of his suit, pulling the firing pin and counting, then stooped and rolled it swiftly down the spiral ramp. A few seconds later, one of the voices hesitated, obviously turning as its volume fluctuated, and Tzolz muffled his auditory channel. The blast shook the spiral passageway, shrapnel spinning and clattering from the entrance. Tzolz flicked on his lights and dashed through the curling smoke, leaping the last of the passage and landing among the disoriented Vulgar platoon, the small figures illuminated harshly in his strobing gaze. He rammed his rifle's bayonet into the closest Vulgar, spinning and knocking an armoured elbow into another's head. Their screams filled his muffled earpiece, the little creatures realising at last what he was, and he snarled inside his helmet, pulling the bayonet free and scything it through another. They were poorly equipped and shoddily dressed despite being caught at home, and Tzolz began to wonder if he might be able to reach his quarry long before the fleet caught up to his small force. He aimed quickly and put a bullet through one more, his troops crouching at the foot of the ramp and firing into the flickering blackness. When the screams had stopped, he leaned against the wall, breathing quickly, his lights taking in the heaped bodies at their feet. His squad began searching the defenders' elaborate but ill-armoured clothes, long, dark fingers investigating pockets and flaps, taking what valuables and compatible ammunition they could find.

Tzolz bent to examine one of the Vulgar, his lights blazing across the pale elfin face. It coughed, retching once, and then tried to turn its head away from the light. He caught its chin with one hand, squeezing its jowls together, and turned it back to him, sliding up his reinforced faceplate. The small

Vulgar's eyes widened as they focused on him, pupils shrunk to pinpoints in the glare. Tzolz looked into the creature's eyes as its broken body attempted to struggle, then back to his team, who were ready to continue. He slid the palm of his three-fingered hand over its face, forced his thumb into one of its eyes and pushed, watching the white flesh depress until it gouted blood. With a wet crack, the Vulgar's skull crumpled in his hand and its movements ceased.

Venturing further into the fortress, the tunnels below became more lived-in, with tapestries cloaking the walls and dividing living spaces, the homely smells of sour ale and poorly maintained plumbing adding to the sense of warmth in the dim light. Tzolz removed his helmet, tossing it onto a loaded dining table in some servants' quarters, and loosened his chest-plating. Like many of his team, his genitals were partially exposed, and the removal of his armour only served to make him look more gangly and naked. Such things mattered not to his breed, one of the wilder, more basic Prism races that dared to delve into the Firmament, and the added bulk would only slow him down from here on. A small timepiece set into his shoulder-plating told him they had less than an hour before battleships stationed in the inland sea would be within range of the fortress and his means of escape. He looked around the large dining hall once more as he pulled on his gauntlets, taking in the dimly glowing logs in the hearth, some scattered to smoke on the tiles by the force of his arrival, and the shelves stacked with bottles and jars, small squealing animals in cages and stinking yeasty cheeses. The Oxel scouts were already raiding the larders, gorging themselves on the hanging lengths of dried, salted meats, but his squad stood around the room still as statues, their thin faces watching him intently in the firelight. There was only one thing his mercenaries really liked to eat, and they would soon have it.

*

At the shaft, Tzolz stopped, the blackness complete around them. They had travelled in darkness from the abandoned servants' quarters down and down until his ears popped. Only the sound of running water had told him they were finally upon it, the great spine of the citadel. He switched his suit lights back on as his feet met soft mounds on the floor, and he looked down to see that they were walking once again on casualties, pieces of all the Vulgar that had fallen from the higher levels during the attack. Most had tumbled straight down the shaft, but some had hit the sides and bounced, ending up lodged like detritus in the corkscrew corridors that made up the shaft's sides. Two levels below them, the drilling team were waiting in silence, their hungry, reflective eyes visible in the suit's weak light. Further below them, the bricks and stones turned to solid rock, cold granite slabs that glittered with running water. At his signal they began their work, dragging heavy drills to the sides of the shaft and pulling chains to start them.

The noise of grinding filtered up along with the drifting cloud of pulverised stone, turning the air around Tzolz's group into a milky soup wherever he shone his suit lights. The team stood, waiting, their faces haggard and obscene in the mist like sunken corpses in a moonlit pool, the portable generators within each soldier's armour issuing their own small wisps of coiling smoke. Running among their feet the Oxel played, one tripping and falling into the chasm before its fellows could stop it. Tzolz watched the body tumble, screaming, until it was lost in the darkness.

The drilling team shut down their machines, the mist swirling in the updraught from the shaft and dissipating. Tzolz's crew bent to look, some grabbing their spring rifles and training them on the hole that had suddenly been revealed in the chasm wall, a weak light pouring from it. Tzolz waited, sighting his own weapon on the caved-in portion of wall below. The edges of the hole crumbled further until a portion of

the wall suddenly sloughed away completely, dropping into the shaft in a cloud of dust and stone and unveiling a cross section of tunnels and levels swarming with shrieking Vulgar soldiers. They squealed to each other and fired into the drilling team, Tzolz's men dropping as many as they could before bolts and sparkers started raining into the level on which they were crouched. The Vulgar squad was mostly composed of trained Loyalists, but the motley armour indicated hired help as well, with not a few Zelioceti and even Wulm mercenaries among their number. Tzolz lifted his rifle to cover his head and made his way down the open passage in the side of the shaft, shots chipping the stone around him. They were surely too far away for any great accuracy, but still he made a last dash for the safety of a stalled drill lying canted on its side. Fizzing sparkers whined and bounced from its casing as he dropped behind it, brushing at a smoking dent in his shoulder-plating. Glancing up at his squad, he could see that two were dead, the third taking a bolt through the eye as he watched. The remains of the drilling team had pushed into the hole and were climbing the ladders in what appeared to be sleeping quarters. Tzolz followed their progress along the flimsy-looking wooden bunks and up into the next chamber, some leaning from the level they were on to shoot up into the mass of screaming Prism scampering this way and that along their bunks. He checked his clock, knowing before he did so that there was no more time for fighting. He clawed at the drill, bringing it up to his chest with a wheeze, and held it there like a shield as he made his way to the hole.

A Wulm dropped into his path just as he reached the ladders, shoved from its level by the panicked Vulgar Loyalists. It shook itself and stood, squealing as Tzolz threw the drill aside and slammed his rifle into its small head. The long-eared Prism's face crumpled in a froth of blood and it rolled, tumbling into the chasm. He looked up at the drillers clambering above, some taking bolts and falling, then back along the open

tunnel he was in. There were bodies piled against the rustic wooden door at the far end, its edge burned away by some sort of incendiary explosion. He kicked it open in a storm of splinters, bringing the rifle up and felling a Vulgar as it ran for the next chamber, then made his way to an apparently undefended lower passage. As he jogged, Tzolz realised he was limping and glanced down to see that the meat of one calf had been mostly torn away by a clawed bullet. He ground his teeth and ran on.

Corphuso watched the Amaranthine as she touched the machine's edges, running a finger almost tenderly along the coils that made up its outer lobes. She hesitated, her ancient mind lost for a minute in some distant reverie, and tapped the structure with her finger, as if trying to gauge the exact blend of the fine amalgam of alloys from which it was made. The tap of her finger produced no sound, the architect noticed, and was pleased.

The flotilla would be under way, he knew, sailing up the fjord and into the canals that led to the fortress's surf lands. From what they could hear, deep in the base of the under-chasm, the attack had lost momentum, perhaps – Corphuso dared to hope – already totally intercepted at the serving levels. The mighty citadel of Nilmuth hadn't been breached in five hundred and seventy years, despite centuries of sporadic civil war across Drolgins. Now a freeVulgar mercenary army from Untmouth protected the fortress at all times, stationed in the vastness of its broad foundations, and a fleet of destroyers – a gift from their secretive allies the Zelioceti – kept watch over the port. Only brute force had gained the Lacaille access today, but they hadn't enough time to reach the treasure they were digging for. Corphuso smiled nervously as he watched the Immortal examining the Shell, wondering again just what he had made, and how it would change things for ever.

'Are you pleased with it, Amaranthine?' he asked, observing

how little she appeared to notice the distant rumbles of conflict in the levels above them.

Voss looked up at him, her hand remaining on the structure it had taken him twenty-four years to build. She was dressed in the exquisite finery the Immortals always wore whenever he saw them, priceless jewels dripping from every cuff and piccadill. ‘I think it is a marvel, Corphuso. A blessing, but also a curse.’

He looked at the glimmering machine. ‘I expect, as ever, the blessing shall be yours, the curse ours.’

She smiled, the expression so rare on her pretty face that he couldn’t help but instantly smile back. ‘You shall be a Prince of the Firmament now, Corphuso – you can leave the cursed behind at last.’

The architect sat down, glancing briefly at the Vulgar soldiers standing to either side of the doors. They were wizened, ill-looking things, their skin shiny and liver-spotted in the glow of the fire. If they had heard what she said, they made no sign. It was true – he wanted to leave the Investiture, but he had never told a soul. The Prism worlds were places of pestilence and fear, where the short-lived suffered and scavenged and fought. His successes had left him far wealthier than most, his large family married into the courts of Moon-kings and Princelings across the Prism Investiture, but he was now bound to the counts of Nilmuth as they fought over his invention themselves, and all but a prisoner in the fortress. His dearest and yet most secret wish had always been to leave all this filth and terror behind with enough money and influence to be granted a place among the Immortals in their Firmament, and perhaps – were there any hope of such a thing – to become an Amaranthine himself.

‘I am bound by duty to my kingdom, and by its loyalty to the Firmament, Amaranthine,’ he said carefully, glancing again at the soldiers. ‘It is not for me to decide my fate, nor would I wish to.’

The Amaranthine looked into his eyes, the smile lingering at the edges of her mouth. He wondered how many liars she had known over her long, long life, and how many she had seen shamed.

‘Quite so, Corphuso,’ she replied at last.

He took up a heavy book awkwardly, leafing through the dense Vulgar print to the engraved pictures, noticing from the corner of his eye how she still looked at him. He was waist-high to the Amaranthine, nothing but a dwarf in her eyes, but some deep Vulgar sense of pride always allowed him to forget his small stature. Gradually he became aware that the sounds in the fortress had changed, almost disappeared, while at the same time deep, resonating grumbles were seeping through the thick walls from the lands outside. The soldiers looked at each other, then at the architect.

‘It’s the flotilla, Architect,’ one said excitedly. ‘It must be!’

He stood, putting down the book to listen. The Amaranthine had returned her gaze to his machine, apparently uninterested in their good fortune. Detonations, distant and yet obviously enormous, popped and thudded high above the fortress. The Lacaille invasion force was fighting back, apparently. They must want what he had very badly to risk returning fire on an armada of sixty-one Lumen-Class Zelioceti destroyers. For what felt like the millionth time, Corphuso deeply regretted forging the thing the Amaranthine was stroking, wishing he could take it all back. Supposedly a machine of life, it had become an inevitable tool of death.

Some other noise returned his attention and that of the soldiers to the thick doors of the under-chasm library where they were sheltering. Someone or something had run the last of the steps and was now outside the door. The Amaranthine looked up suddenly, taking her hand at last from the Shell.

A weighty oaken slat cracked and sizzled as the door was fired upon from outside, two more shots blowing the double doors in. The two soldiers fell under the flying debris as

someone opened fire into the chamber, rolling in the mist to find cover. Corphuso crouched and knocked the table, scattering the stack of books he'd been absently looking through during the siege, pieces of the chair he had been sitting upon a moment earlier raining down around him.

Looking across the floor from under the table, he caught a glimpse of his attacker ducking behind a column. He felt hot sweat prickle down his neck and chest, staying very still. So, the Lacaille were now employing the very breed they feared the most. He hoped they suffered for it in the end. He saw the bony, elongated Prism male, genitals exposed, hideous face partially hidden in shadow, slide the bolt on its rifle and peer around the column.

As it did so, the air turned to fire.

Corphuso rolled and covered his face, waistcoat and cloak shrouding him like blankets as the library was engulfed. For what felt like a small lifetime roaring heat pelted the table, flowing around his small hiding place and sucking away all the air, then suddenly it was over as quickly as it had started, the fire dissolving into sooty smoke.

He peered out from under his smouldering clothes to where the Amaranthine stood, the charred flagstones describing a perfect semicircle of blackness around her feet. Corphuso glanced back to the column, the shelf of books behind it still aflame, but could see no sign of their attacker.

Voss, the Immortal, patted the unharmed machine at her side, the spiral of hollows in its shell gleaming iridescently in the smoke-thick air like polished opal. 'I suspect it's time to take your treasure elsewhere, Corphuso.' She smiled again. 'Come. You need no longer worry about appearances – the Firmament expects us.'