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Killing Caiaphas

He ran with his hands over his eyes. He just kept running, not knowing where his feet were taking him, wondering what would happen when his strength finally failed him and his hands moved away from his face and he would be exposed to the Great Ruin. He had just been deglassed a short while ago, and now an outcast, a heretic, he could only leave his family, his town, his people, and run headlong into some impossible void that held such a terrifying mystery that no one still living even knew what lay in store for one such as him. The last deglassing was more than two hundred years ago, and there were only rumors about what the experience must have been like for the person so disabled. Forebearer just ran, hoping that something, anything would happen to him that would prove a moment of salvation and he would be hidden from the horror of the Great Ruin. Without his reality machine, the nonbeing that surely would fill his senses would be a living hell. And then something unexpected happened. He fell into water. As he began to sink, the memory of the events leading up to the deglassing seemed more present in his mind as the cold of the water penetrated him with a chilly grasp. The water was his reality now, and he realized that he would have to try and swim or else die, and so he thrashed his arms around until he surfaced, so preoccupied with his motions that he didn't even notice that his hands were now no longer covering his eyes and he was just being blinded by the sun above him as his eyes could not adjust to light very well, and he

wondered if this was the Great Ruin, but somehow he didn't think so. He just kept thrashing at the water, propelling himself forward, now blinded by light, and fearful of ever finding land before his feeble attempt at swimming ended with the sinking into the murky depths of the water below. But he felt emboldened by the idea that perhaps the water meant escape, from what he wasn't sure but it was comforting to keep fleeing and realize that his eyes were seeing *naked* reality for the first time in his life. The yellow skinsuit that he wore made coursing through the water easier and he began to think of redemption, and death, and whether he should just give up and let the water take him, or continue prompting his survival instinct toward greater levels of intensity. He chose the latter since the feel of the water, being both new and revivifying compel courage to continue on. As he swam, he kept replaying the deglassing ceremony in his mind.

The village elder, Inclose, kept prying and prying at the glasses that had covered Forebearer's real eyes for the whole of his life, and even in the midst of this horror, the thought of how his heresy was discovered played in his mind like a troupe of tumblers deftly dancing around in his consciousness. It all started with his poem.

The Raphaelites were known for being artists, but they usually preferred visual media. When Forebearer began writing poetry, his fate as an iconoclast in the clan, no, the whole world began to seem more assured. But he couldn't help himself. The compulsion to write had hold of him like a fist. The fact that the two clans of his civilization, the Raphaelites and the Vacuumists were the only peoples who would arbitrate the arts was a true problem of adjudicating quality. Even though his poem, when it was published, was reviewed positively, his peers immediately feared that it could be misconstrued. The poem itself was so simple on the face of it, but it broke a cardinal rule and that was the doubt it placed in the mind of the citizenry as to the reality of their already adjusted lives. It read:

Dust falls on the glass
Now a mirror

Dripping a two faced time
Leaving the clansman to realize
The dust was absent
The mirror did not exist
So there was nothing to fall on the
Mirror; not even a mirror to be fallen upon
And not even a world to support the profusions
Of dust and mirrors, for there was only the profound
Thought itself, the dissolution of time and being; there was
Nothing.

The Vacuumists, who held the reality machines covering their eyes as a scientific verification of reality, started the bickering between the two clans, and there didn't seem anything else to do but hold a conference on the merits of Forebearer's poem.

Inclose spoke first at the "conference," his glassed eyes whirring in their constant simulations.

"This poem that Forebearer has written could poison the minds of the citizenry in unimaginable ways," he said. "It is a form of seeing, for everyone knows that art alters perception. He seems to be talking about the Great Ruin, and we cannot have talk like this."

"But it is just a poem," Forebearer said in his own defense. "It is only natural that something of our collective unconscious should sneak into it. We are not machines just because we have the prismatic to keep us from the terrifying Sight."

"I agree with Inclose," Distant said. "The poem is heretical. It deserves to be burned in every publication it appears in. The only thing we have to do is decide what Forebearer's punishment should be."

"But this is absurd," Forebearer said. "Art should be immune from censure for it is only the representation of reality, not reality itself."

“Enough,” Inclose said. “You have broken the covenant of Myriad. Distant is right. All we have business for now is to decide your punishment.”

“Then this is truly a false proceeding,” Forebearer said. “You do not want dialogue since it is obvious you have already made up your minds. You are all narrow-minded imbeciles who can’t appreciate the subtleties of life. It is no wonder that the council is made up of Vacuumists. You do not tolerate anything beyond your narrow views.”

Forebearer realized he had made a deadly mistake, and he could tell by the look in Inclose’s face that he had just made his punishment more severe.

“I have decided his fate already in my mind,” Inclose said. “You are going to be deglassed.”

There was a general sigh of horror in the audience, and the panic in Forebearer was absolute. Someone in the audience stood up.

“But this practice has not been done for centuries. Surely you should soften your heart. No one deserves that punishment. The Great Ruin would possess his mind forever and Forebearer might not even survive.”

“Ever since the Great Ruin, the pushing of a false reality into our own, we have had to be on guard for every kind of potential incursion of this false world,” Distant said. “I concur with Inclose. The punishment might be severe, but given that the future of Forebearer’s writing career, we cannot take the chance of further heresies. The Myriad covenant is absolutely clear on this point. In several days, the deglassing will commence.”

“I would take great pleasure if the deglassing were to fall upon me,” Inclose said, and Forebearer shuddered at the frightening display of viciousness that was surrounding this sham of a court proceeding.

“Then I will just say,” Forebearer began, “that you all are too obtuse to realize the merits of art as the Raphaelites contend, and that in your desire to punish me, you are really punishing the Raphaelites. Your disgust of art has always been apparent and now your aversion is insane.”

“Take him away!” Inclose shouted.

“Yes, I will go now,” Forebearer said. “But yours is the greater crime and I will find someway, any way to keep writing, even in the limbo of the Great Ruin, and I will torment you with the written word for the rest of my life.”

“Folly!” Inclose shouted again. “Be quiet and be gone.”

Two guards came and led Forebearer away.

Now as Forebearer struggled with his arms and legs he found that he was tiring too quickly; the water was winning. But, even with his diminished sight, he thought he could see land just a little farther away. He resolved to reach it, and when he finally found the beach, he collapsed on the sand and became insensible.

Peter and Judas were reconnoitering the beach area when they found Forebearer in a heap on the sand. They looked at each other and just shrugged. They were intrigued by the yellow skinsuit that the strange human wore. It was not a garb they were used to, so they stared down at the stranger wondering where such a being could come from.

“What do you think?” Peter asked.

“The only thing I can think of is that he came from the leper colony on Coney Island.”

“Yeah, we really don’t know much about it given the stigma.”

“Perhaps we should get him to the car before the bloody Romans come across him,” Peter said. “There’s no telling what they would do to him.”

“I agree.”

Peter and Judas grabbed the body and dragged it to the road above the beach. They piled him into the Mercedes and Judas got behind the wheel.

“Do we dare take him to the safe house?” Peter asked.

“Based on the way he’s dressed, I don’t think he’s from one of the other rival groups. He’s certainly not an Essene.”

“Then let’s take the chance until we can figure out what this person is all about.”

They pulled onto Cerberus Avenue and headed for Claudius Street, where they would take the Augustus tunnel back into the city. As they drove on, Judas turned to Peter and said, “You know Jesus won’t let us question him in the usual way. Sometimes his compassion is confounding.”

“That’s his function as the Seventh Incarnation,” Peter said. “When we finally found out that his true destiny was to overthrow Rome, it was too late. Convincing Jesus himself that he wasn’t supposed to be so gentle has been nothing but an exercise in frustration.”

“Yes, in his First Incarnation he was so convinced that he should win the hearts and minds of the people in the sheer act of preaching as if that ever convinced anybody.”

“Well, Judas. He is the Godman, so we have to assume that the divine side of his personality is going to contain quirks. What do Gods know of humans?”

“Once we convinced him by his Fourth Incarnation that miracles only attract too much attention, he seemed to settle into his role as the messiah, but it has always been hard to get him to realize that he doesn’t have to suffer to accomplish his goal.”

“The irony is, he always does suffer because the Romans keep discovering his destiny. I wasn’t sure how until I found the manuscripts when we broke into the palace. Some ridiculous prophets have been predicting his Lordship and it always scared the Romans enough to seek him out every time he was reborn.”

“Well, the labyrinth will protect him, at least for now.”

Peter and Judas paid attention to the road now as they entered the tunnel until they heard a groan from the back seat where their hapless companion began to stir.

“He’s coming to,” Peter said.

“Say something to him to keep him calm,” Judas said.

Peter turned around in his seat and saw the man trying to lift his head. That’s when Peter saw the metal rings around his eyes. Peter stared at the stranger and wondered what the rings were for. But first he just wanted to know his name.

“You’re all right,” Peter said. “Do you know where you came from; do you know your name?”

“Where am I?” Forebearer said.

“You’re in the back seat of a car for one thing. You’re in New Rome for another thing.”

“You speak strangely,” Forebearer said. “I know nothing of this place you call New Rome. What is this vehicle we are in?”

“First answer my questions,” Peter said. “Tell me where you come from and tell me your name.”

“I come from Discourse,” Forebearer said, realizing with a start that he rarely spoke the name of his own city. It just seemed unnecessary since the borders of their world were limited to what the prismatic would allow them to see. “And my name is Forebearer.”

“Strange names indeed,” Peter said. “Has this been some kind of place that the Romans have allowed as a kind of haven or something?”

“Romans?” Forebearer said. “I know nothing of Romans.”

Forebearer began to wonder if this was what the Great Ruin was; a hallucination of an alternate world from his own, but where from his unconscious these strange people emanated he was helpless to explain.

“Do you come from the leper colony?” Peter probed further.

“I do not know of a leper colony or even what a leper colony might be. I can’t even tell if I am experiencing reality at all or whether the Great Ruin has taken possession of my senses.”

“The Great Ruin?” Peter said.

“You don’t know?” Forebearer said with real consternation.

Peter shook his head no.

“The Great Ruin is the imploding of reality into a formlessness that normal brain processing cannot accommodate. We need these prismatic to adjust our perceptions to keep from going mad.” His hands had gone reflexively to his eyes and then he realized that they were gone, the prismatic and the protection they had generated for the whole of his life, at least until now that he had to live without them and face this strange situation that he could no more verify as real as he could tell whether a human and a projection of one were now the same thing to his disabled condition.

Peter turned to Judas. “He’s full of stories that can hardly be believed. It’s like an alternate civilization has been on the borders of New Rome this whole time and nobody has even heard about it. He has these strange metal rings around his eyes that he says keep them from going mad from a thing called the Great Ruin. It all sounds so improbable, I don’t know what to make of it.”

Judas spoke then. “Do you wish to go back to where you came from?” he asked Forebearer.

“I cannot,” he said. “I have been ostracized. Maybe they think that I could live among them as a victim of the Great Ruin but I don’t want that. I want to be as far away from them as I can. But I have also become an insurgent. I want to keep publishing my writing until it finds their hands, and torment them with the truth about our situation for as long as I hold breath.”

“Sounds like a real vendetta,” Judas said. “We can always use insurgents in our cause. Would you like to join the Company of the Seven Saints?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Forebearer said.

“If you want to be an insurgent, you can help us with our world, dominated as it is by the evil Romans. You see, there were four of us that Jesus recruited, not twelve like the good book says. And he didn’t choose us because we were fisherman but because we were immortals. We have been planning the overthrow of Rome for two thousand years. But they just kept getting stronger, and when God decided to send Jesus, he kept failing time and again, until now we have him in his Seventh Incarnation and have finally persuaded him of his military role. It took that long to convince a God that he really needs to fight, not love people into being good. The human nature is so blackened by evil...”

“Please, Judas,” Peter said, “no more philosophizing. I think our companion here has had enough shocks for today. We’ll take him to the safe house and let Jesus do his thing.”

They had exited the tunnel and now they drove on XIIIth Avenue, which would take them directly to their destination. Then they heard a car coming up very fast behind them. As the car neared them, machine gun fire began to pelt the back of the Mercedes. The back windshield broke.

“Down, everyone!” Judas shouted. He gunned the engine and they began driving very fast as the car behind them closed in. Peter picked up a handgun and started firing out the window. Forebearer just clung to the backseat of the car wondering what he had gotten himself into.

“I think it’s the Essenes,” Peter said as he kept discharging rounds from his gun.

“I’ll turn up a side street and try to lose them,” Judas said.

They barreled forward until Judas swerved onto a narrow street that barely had room for one car to maneuver in. But it proved to be a deadly mistake. At the other end of the street, a car waited for them, and it was too late for Judas to react. The Mercedes collided with the SUV blocking the road, and two men, who hung out the windows, spit machine gun fire that hit Judas full in the chest. He had taken four rounds. Peter sprung into action and hopped out of the car, opening the back door, and pulling Forebearer out. “Follow me,” he shouted as the men shot at them and pieces of brick rained down around them. Peter pushed open a door and they ran into the building, where they searched for escape routes until they emerged onto a small street. “This way,” Peter called to Forebearer. They ran along an alleyway until they reached a building. “This is it,” Peter said. They entered the building by Peter putting his palm on a pad next to a door and it slid open, giving them passage. They were immediately confronted with a maze of stairs. Peter ran down them with Forebearer growing ever more confused about where they were. The experience of negotiating the stairs produced a vertigo that Forebearer couldn’t adjust to. They turned into other hallways with still more stairs until they finally reached what appeared to be a bottom. “In here,” Peter called. Jesus was awaiting them.

“We lost Judas,” Peter said. “The Essenes shot him.”

“He’ll be all right,” Jesus said. “All the commotion will bring the centurions and the Romans will get Judas. We’ll just have to get him out of the prison somehow.”

“It’s a good thing the other insurrectionists don’t know we’re immortal. They might change their tactics and then we’d have to change ours, and it would be a circle of destruction that would involve too many people and risk your exposure.”

“I still don’t know why you protect me like a butterfly in a chrysalis,” Jesus said. “But here. We have a visitor.”

Forebearer was looking at the machines in the room, things he would later learn were called computers, and that he was in a kind of command center where the Company of the Seven Saints plotted their various schemes.

“Please,” Jesus said. “Sit with me and let’s have a talk. I can tell by your dress and the metal rings around your eyes that you are from Discourse.”

“You know of this?” Peter asked, incredulous.

“We have information about them, yes. But there is much about them we don’t understand. They seem to labor under a belief that the world suffers from a flaw in its ability to produce stable realities. It was started in the twelfth century when the scientists of that time discovered a wormhole that would take them into a different dimension. They founded Discourse there, but the wormhole was actually a loop and they never knew they had never left our reality but were entrapped in an alternate state that was unstable. Ignorant of science, they mistakenly took the instability of the wormhole which they never really left as a diminution of reality when it was just the wormhole weakening. They could have come back any time, but they chose to stay and their culture became what our friend here now knows.”

Forebearer regarded Jesus. Jesus' carefully coifed hair and the suit that he wore produced a strange mixture of business-like acumen and sangfroid that seemed to make Jesus a living contradiction. But Forebearer didn't know whether to believe this strangely calm man or not. He didn't know of wormholes or twelfth century scientists. He was always told that Discourse had existed for thousands of years and the makers of the prismatic were wise men that had studied the technology of reality making just in case such a thing as the Great Ruin became a possibility. It never occurred to him that the wise men knew more than the stories' parabolic words.

"It may be hard for you to hear this, uh...?"

"Forebearer."

"Yes, Forebearer. But all the leaders have been keeping your society secret from the Romans by starting the leper colony myth. We thought that letting your civilization continue on its own course would be better than trying to integrate you into this world, which is a ruin of its own. It would probably be best if you stayed with us now since it will be safer for you with me.

"I'm sorry, sir," Forebearer said. "But I am consumed with vengeance for my people doing this to me. I can torment them with words as I am a poet and I want some way for my communications to reach them and disrupt their smug sense of themselves."

"There is no room for vitriol in our emotions," Jesus said. "You see, I am the one who was foretold would come, and I have come to deliver people from their sins, all of their negativity and clinging to falsehood. You see, I, like your people, believe that false realities should be obstructed and then eradicated. I intend this to be my last incarnation, and I intend to succeed. Here, put your hands in mine."

Jesus stretched out his hands and took Forebearer's hands in his. Immediately, a sense of calm descended on Forebearer and the sword of vengeance he felt in his heart instantly evaporated. A feeling of absolute joy possessed him.

Peter, who had been watching, instantly fell to his knees and bowed his head to the floor.

"They know I'm capable of this kind of healing," Jesus said to Forebearer, "but they are surprised every time I do it. In fact, given modern medicine, I usually heal people of their mental maladies more than physical ones anymore. Plus, they are so fearful for my safety that it's the rare occasion I get to heal anyone. Thank you, Forebearer, you have allowed me to exercise my spirituality and it is very fulfilling for me."

Forebearer just stared at his hands and felt the peace that had suddenly come into his heart. But just then, a sentry appeared in the room.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but Judas has just come back. He's in bad shape."

Judas, who was being kept in a standing position by leaning on two sentries, walked in the room.

"They never saw it coming," Judas breathed out. "When they came into the car to make sure I was dead, I blew them all away. I think there were four of them."

"At least you weren't captured by the Romans," Peter said. "We were afraid we would have to plot a way to get you out of prison."

"Well, the bad news is that the Romans did follow me, and they're in the labyrinth now. Shall we go rescue them?"

"Of course," Jesus said. "Bring them here. I will spoil their allegiance to evil."

"Forget it," Peter said from where he knelt. "We can't take the chance of them becoming double agents. Let them wander until they die."

“Why do you have such a cold heart, Peter?” Jesus said.

“Modernism demands we think this way,” Peter said. “You have to understand the cruelty we have to be capable of to survive in this era.”

“You are my master in these affairs,” Jesus said, “being an immortal, and having seen many things I have not. But I insist you bring the Romans to me.”

“Jesus!” Peter cried.

“Let it be done,” Jesus said.

The sentries left the room. Judas weakly sat in a chair. He began to recover, as his wounds seemed to close together, punctuated by a slivered scar gradually fading.

“I do not understand this fighting,” Forebearer said.

“The evil empire of the Romans needs to be overthrown,” Peter said. “You will understand in time.”

The sentries entered the room holding two Roman centurions at gunpoint. Jesus looked at the Romans with a chilling gaze.

“You must give up your allegiance to evil,” Jesus said to them.

“Please don’t kill us,” one of them said. “We have information that could help you.”

Peter shot Jesus a look, and Jesus nodded his head. Peter arose from his kneeling position and walked over to the two Romans.

“Out with it,” he said.

“It’s Caiaphas,” the Roman said.

“That collaborator,” Peter spit out.

“He has devised a perfect assassination plot of Jesus.”

“What is it?”

“He has turned your sentries against you.”

“Impossible,” Peter said.

Just then the sentry who had been holding the gun on the Roman pointed it at Jesus and opened fire as the Roman grinned. Judas had been moving all the time they were talking, though and had been standing next to Jesus when the gun went off. In one motion he had pushed Jesus out of the way and then rolled over the table picking up a machine gun and fired, cutting down the two sentries, but the Romans had dived on the floor and fired at Judas, since their guns were never removed. But Peter picked up a fork that Jesus had been using to eat with and flung it at one of the Romans, burying it into his eye. Judas took care of the other Roman.

Peter kicked the bodies one by one to make sure they were dead. Judas looked relieved until they realized that Jesus had taken a hit. The wound in his chest was bleeding out very fast.

“It’s mortal,” Judas said. “Looks like we’ve lost the Seventh Incarnation.”

“Damn that Caiaphas,” Peter said rushing to the aid of his dying master.

“Do not worry,” Jesus said, coughing up blood. “I will see you in my next incarnation. The Romans will not win.”

“You say that every time you come back,” Peter said, tears filling his eyes. “Go well into the afterlife,” he said. And then Jesus died.

Forebearer spent the next several weeks in the Company of the Seven Saints, making forays into the outside world of the labyrinth and noticing the huge buildings and strange vehicles called “cars.” Eventually, Peter, John, and Paul decided that they must destroy the labyrinth since their hiding place would certainly be discovered. It was at this

time too that Peter had a complete mental breakdown. Judas even had him on suicide watch in their new apartment. Peter was in such anguish that it made Forebearer very anxious.

“Don’t worry about Peter,” Judas said to him once. “He’ll be all right. It was just that we had such high hopes for this incarnation, and believe me, we are all a little anxious about what will happen next. The Essenes aren’t as active against either us or the Romans, and now with Jesus out of the picture, the world seems to have undergone a second fall.”

“A second fall?”

“Yes, that’s right. The first fall happened after Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden and we are taking that imagery to describe what’s going on now. Seven is a holy number. Part of Peter’s distress can be chalked up to doubt creeping in; like maybe it was never Jesus’ task but ours to change the world.”

“Let me see him,” Forebearer said.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea right now.”

“Please.”

“All right,” Judas said. He led Forebearer into the room where Peter lay writhing on a bed.

“Come to me,” Peter rasped at Forebearer.

Forebearer went to Peter’s side and took his hand.

“It’s been said that Jesus didn’t die on the Roman cross,” Peter said, “but died of a broken heart. My heart is broken now.”

“What will you do now that Jesus is gone?”

“The Romans have made us terrorists. We will have to bring about the fall of Rome on our own. We can no longer wait for the Incarnation to do it for us.”

“So you will live and not take your own life?” Forebearer asked.

“Yes, my heart is broken and there is a real risk that I might expire. Judas has a defibrillator on hand just in case my heart fails me. I don’t know if it’s such a good idea for you to stay with us now. Things will be getting very unsafe.”

“I have a plan to kill Caiaphas,” Forebearer said.

“Vengeance is never good,” Peter whispered, his body weakening.

“I no longer feel vengeance for my people, but I wish to revenge Jesus. He is the one who took the sword out of my hand and somehow I feel clear about this assassination I propose as a rational act, not one of vengeance. Jesus made me believe in the possibility of a good life and I wish that for your people now.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Peter said. “It would be a suicide mission.”

“Now that I don’t have the prismatic, I feel like I see reality in the way it was meant to be viewed. I have no wish to take my own life either, but I feel a sense of duty and purpose about this. You must understand that I must do this.”

“Perhaps that is the meaning of your being here. Perhaps God brought you to us for some reason even though I don’t think that this plan to kill Caiaphas would be it.”

“Just hear me out.”

Forebearer left Peter’s room with his convictions intact, and with Peter’s assent in his mind. He told Judas, Paul, and John about his plan. They were taken aback that their new found friend could possibly have thought of this, but they, like Peter, felt that they couldn’t miss the chance to really get Caiaphas, something that would make their new found predicament easier, certainly. So they complied with Forebearer’s instructions as he laid them out. Forebearer took the parchment they supplied him and used an ancient concoction of ink that had been taught him

by his grandfather, something that was used to destroy missives that could fall into the wrong hands. Forebearer finished his preparations and rolled the parchment, which he finished with a wax seal. Meanwhile, Peter was strengthening, and Judas and he spent many hours in conversation about what their plans should be. Sometimes the discussions got very heated as they disagreed on some of the methods they should employ, but they both agreed to wait until Forebearer had completed his mission, something he seemed so intent on doing. Sometimes Judas just shook his head at the improbable plan that Forebearer had fashioned, but then Forebearer seemed so confident of success, that they just looked for ways to get him out of Caiaphas' room without any solutions presenting themselves. When the time came to let Forebearer go, Judas kissed Forebearer on the cheek and whispered into his ear, "the Judas kiss. It will be for good luck, not for ill as the good book has portrayed it." Forebearer didn't know what he meant but just walked out the apartment door and walked in the direction of Vth Street, the place where Caiaphas' offices were, straightening his new clothes.

As Forebearer walked, he suddenly found himself confronted by two men wearing robes, hoods hiding their faces. One of them took his arm to Forebearer's alarm.

"It is I, Inclose," the hooded man said.

"And I, Distant," the other man said.

"How did you find me?" Forebearer asked.

"Something that we don't talk about very often," Distant said. "The prismatic, since they are attached to a chip in the perceptual areas of the brain, give us a kind of paranormal sense; an ability to read minds. I can tell from yours right now that you are on your way to do something particularly awful. I suggest that it is not worth your life as you seem to be ruminating on."

"What do you know of it? Besides, how do you know about New Rome?"

“We have always known of it. But we thought it best to hide our knowledge from the people. You see, you were only the first cog in a machine that has been building in the people’s mind for a long time and that is the thought that our existence in Discourse is running its course that bad things are in store for us. We had to make such an example of you for social control. We always intended to reglass you but you just ran off and we feared you had drowned.”

“You must not stay me from my task,” Forebearer said. “I am resolved.”

“I can see that,” Inclose said. “I appeal to your better nature not to proceed.”

“It may change this world.”

“But it is not our world,” Inclose said. “Come back with us, let us reglass you, and we can let you write your poetry. We won’t stand in the way of that anymore. I must confess that we probably made a horrible mistake by making your punishment so severe.”

“Let me go,” Forebearer said. “Surely you must see in my mind that I will not be deterred.”

“Yes,” Distant said. “But let us help you.”

“I don’t see how you can.”

“You will see,” Inclose said. And he turned from facing Forebearer and the two men moved passed him.

Forebearer thought about the conversation with Inclose and Distant as he walked quickly in the direction of Caiaphas’ offices, clutching the document in his hand. So they felt remorse. All the better. But his thoughts needed to be focused on his task, so he walked and when he arrived at his destination, he walked in the building and confronted the doorman.

“Do you have business here?” The doorman asked him.

“Tell Caiaphas that I have something he would very much like to take a look at, something about the eighth incarnation,” Forebearer said.

The man picked up a phone, and after a short conversation, put the receiver down and told Forebearer to go to the fourteenth floor. After Forebearer exited the elevator he checked to make sure his sunglasses were in place and then knocked on the suite door. A big man, obviously a bodyguard, opened it and motioned for Forebearer to come in. The big man escorted Forebearer passed another guard into the office and pointed to the door. “He is expecting you,” the man said, and as Forebearer walked into the office, he was careful to push in the lock as the door closed behind him.

“The doorman said you have a document about the Eighth Incarnation,” Caiaphas said, his back to Forebearer.

“Yes,” Forebearer said. “Your prophets have been successful at finding every one of his previous incarnations but this eighth one will be beyond their abilities and it may finally prove your undoing.”

“A man who peddles information,” Caiaphas said, “always wants something in return. I doubt you are doing this out of some kind of altruism for the empire.”

“Just let us drink together, and I will show you what I have for you.”

Caiaphas laughed. “Judas sold out Jesus for a couple of pieces of silver and you would sell him out for a drink.”

“It is my honor to be in your presence, sir,” Forebearer said beginning to grow bolder by the minute.

“Vodka?” Caiaphas asked. Forebearer nodded.

Caiaphas reached into his liquor cabinet and produced the alcohol, which he placed on his desk and then fished for a couple of glasses.

“Please fill it full,” Forebearer said. Caiaphas complied and filled the glass generously.

“Look around you and you can see the strength of the Roman Empire embodied here,” Caiaphas said.

“You see this sword?” He said. Forebearer nodded. “Its superior technology at the time allowed the Romans to conquer the known world. Who would have guessed the shape of a piece of steel could have such consequences.”

“Is that why you collaborate?” Forebearer asked. “Because you admire them?”

“I admire power, young man,” he said. “Now, to our business. Let me see this document.”

Forebearer handed Caiaphas the document and took a long draught from his glass. Forebearer watched as Caiaphas broke the seal and began to unravel the parchment, which then instantly burst into flames. Forebearer sprayed the alcohol in his mouth onto Caiaphas and he screamed as his body suddenly became engulfed in flames. Forebearer calmly walked over to the desk and poured the bottle of vodka on Caiaphas making the flames even deadlier. There was pounding at the door and Forebearer waited for the bodyguards to break through, thus sealing his fate. Caiaphas died quickly from the immolation and as the guards broke through the door, they, for some reason, slumped to the floor. Two hooded men stood in the room then, and secreted their daggers back into their robes. It was Inclose and Distant.

“Hurry,” Inclose said. “Like I said we would find a way to help you. Now we must leave quickly.”

Forebearer looked behind him at the burning remains of Caiaphas and felt satisfaction that his assassination attempt had succeeded. The ink had been specially treated so that anyone who unraveled the scroll would find himself holding fire, just as Forebearer’s grandfather had showed him. With a little alcohol and the assassination was complete. Now he followed Inclose and Distant out of the building, where they got to the sidewalk and ran together. When they had sufficiently distanced themselves from the building, Inclose turned to Forebearer and said, “Now will you agree to come back to Discourse with us?”

Forebearer nodded.

Now Forebearer was an old man, volumes of his poetry books sitting in rows on the bookshelves. He had decided to write Peter a letter, and his prismatic clicked and whirred as he put pen to paper.

You are still young and now I am old, waiting for death, now assured of immortality as the survival of death has been beautifully portrayed for me through the presence of the Incarnations. I hope that as this letter has found you that you have ceased being so militant as the true way is peace, something you somewhat reviled in the Incarnations, but his is the real salvation, the beauty of truth lying in its gentle persuasion of the soul's innermost goodness. The way of the Incarnation is the way of the simple realization that hatred is often reversed like a river running a double course, populating the water with lilies the reverence of touch can only dream of accomplishing. For all of life is a dream, Peter. The prismatic that cover my eyes are only simulations of that which you have without thought for their reality and wholeness. I adjure you to dispel the myth of indignation before a false reality invades you with its awful pretension to power, but the truth of life is that we make reality in the form of our innermost desires which we cannot stop from surfacing except some overmastering principle imprisons us with its fanciful dream...

Just then, Forebearer's eight-year-old grandson, Ingold, walked into his study.

"Grandfather," he said. "I've been having this terrible time lately."

"What is it?" Forebearer asked.

"I had a thought that gave birth to another thought and then I saw a dazzling array of other lives. Have you ever heard of New Rome?"

Forebearer dropped his pen in something like horror or pleasure he wasn't sure. Who would have guessed that the Eighth Incarnation would be born in Discourse and within his family lineage?

"I will take you there," Forebearer said. "There is someone you need to meet."