

I am Alpha and Omega

All around me the angels are falling.

One by one they burst silently into flame as we fall to Earth.

Blinding pain, searing heat and I'm burning too.

I scream myself awake.

The wall of light is cold and wet against my cheek as I lean against it.

I blink and the world tilts, the wall becomes an ocean, and with the return of smell the ocean becomes a glittering pool of vomit reflecting the flickering streetlights overhead.

Nice work, Perez. Real classy.

An early morning rainstorm batters the city, black clouds under a dark sky. Badly animated holo-signs cast dancing shadows over the alley where I'm lying. Fuck. Someone should tell me I have a drinking problem.

But this time I have a good reason to get drunk. A damn good reason.

Most of us would drink to forget seeing a helpless man murdered in cold blood. The rest would reach screaming for the bottle when they saw what the victim did to his captors afterwards.

A man in a dark coat watches me from the mouth of the alley. I can't see his face, but the way his coat flaps in the wind like a shroud draping a corpse reminds me of someone. There's something familiar about him that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, but I've seen too many shrouded corpses in my life to be intimidated.

"What? Never seen a guy pass out in the rain before?" I rasp, my throat raw from too much cheap whisky.

Never again, I promise myself, feeling the asphalt grind against my cheek. I swallow and then instantly regret the action when my stomach turns over and I heave up sour bile and what feels like the major part of my guts all over again. Then I have to smile at the self-delusion. Who am I kidding? This is not the first time I've passed out after a night of drinking with Wagner, and it won't be the last.

At least I had the decency to do it outside this time. I roll over on my back and let the warm rain wash the filth from my face. A raving appetite rumbles my insides. How long have I been out? I don't have the foggiest, but it can't be that long, or Wagner would have come looking for me. Come to think of it, I have no idea how we ended up at this place at all. There's a hole the size of a headshot exit wound in my recollection of the night and I've got a headache to match. Not a first either.

In the sky above, the bright band of the Ring slices the sky in two, glittering like a frosted scimitar in the light from our not-yet-risen twin suns. To the east, a peach tint above the skyline heralds the birth of yet another dreary morning. Fuck this. It's time to get back to work.

I roll back on my side and the guy on the corner is gone. Either satisfied I wasn't going to ruin his karma by choking to death on his watch, or he figured I was not worth robbing. Either way, I guess he decided I was

someone else's problem.

O tempora o fucking mores, huh?

When I finally scrape my ass off the ground and stumble back into the thundering noise inside the bar, Wagner is sitting in a corner booth, nursing a bleeding fist and a full pint. He sees me come in and I give him a nod, quietly impressed that he has managed to get into a fight while I was gone. Perhaps I was out longer than I thought. My giant Norse friend just gives me the evil eye and downs his beer in one long swallow.

I head for the bar through the rowdy crowd. My usual cure for a hangover like this is a stiff whisky or two, but my stomach is not up for it. Too bad. I could really use a dram right now because my hands are shaking and there's a dull ache in my back. Week-old bullet holes tend to do that to you.

Working as head of security for the largest corporation in the system has its perks, but the downside is you tend to get shot a lot. Somewhere out there I know there is a bullet with my name on it, but so far I've had the fortune to only get shot with nameless ones. Getting old in this business is not an option and I know it's only a matter of time before I get painfully acquainted with that bullet. Unfortunately this job is the only thing I know how to do, so quitting is not an option. Talk about a bum deal. With my luck I would probably get killed by a speeding bus on my first day as a civilian anyway. I'm such a bloody cliché.

I squeeze in next to a noisy teen threesome snogging against the counter and wave to the bartender. "Water. On the rocks. Make it a double." I have to shout and use sign language to make myself heard over the rumbling dysFunk basslines shaking the foundations of the building.

An unusual order, judging by the time it takes the barman to whip it up. That gives me time to think about some things I'd rather not think about. Like why we are here.

Not in the philosophical sense, but why Gray has sent for Wagner and had him meet me here in this illegal bar on the Rim of Southern Masada.

We're here because Gray wants us to find a guy and bring him in. At first it sounded like your average, easy-in, easy-out, smash-and-grab assignment, but then I saw the video.

The camera points dead ahead, showing a concrete wall hung with a grim-looking banner bearing the crossed swords and stylised supernova of a Redeemer battle flag. A man in an expensive-looking black silk shirt kneels on the floor in front of it. His dark hair falls almost to the floor and a well-trimmed beard adorns his chin. He's a handsome man, and the blood running down his forehead from the deep wounds beneath the spiked metal crown is almost too much. You couldn't have created a more perfect rendition of the suffering of Christ if you'd commissioned Michelangelo. His hands are tied behind his back.

Head bowed in submission, tilted slightly sideways, he gazes one-eyed into the camera from beneath dripping brows. Where the other eye should be is only a red, gaping hole. He breathes heavily through flaring nostrils and it's obvious he's struggling to keep his calm.

From stage left comes another man into the frame. He wears the long, loose dress and headgear of a holy warrior. The vicious knife in his hand and the dark beard on his chin complete the picture. He walks behind the kneeling man and is joined by two similarly dressed men, one on each side.

You know what's coming.

The stage is set, and the scene is no different from a thousand such plays from the bloody repertoire of religious terror. The speech is no different either. Neither is the final gasp of fear and denial as a rough hand grabs hair, pulling back and to the side, and neither is the cruel climax. The knife does its grisly work on his throat with the frightening precision of a skilled butcher. God is great.

The head flops forward and the body sags, one bent leg twitching, a dark glistening spot of bodily fluids spreading beneath the kneeling form.

Looking steadily into the camera, the executioner declares this to be the inevitable end facing all false prophets, and then he starts counting off the political prisoners they want released. There are always prisoners they want released.

A wet bubbling sound comes from the corpse as air escapes from collapsing lungs.

The list of prisoners goes on and on and this is usually the place where the major news feeds cut to the inevitable government press-conference. Outraged officials denounce all forms of extremism. Promises are made of increased persecution of innocent civilians. You know the drill. Everybody knows they will not catch the people responsible for the slaying, but they want to keep their jobs, so what else can they do? But this video is not on any of the major feeds. Not yet. On the underground channels they don't cut, they don't fade. Instead the video rolls on, and this is where things start to get really interesting.

As the list is being read, a sudden movement in the lower part of the frame draws the eye. The head of the corpse is moving.

Slowly lifting from the bloody chest, the head pulls back, blood still running feebly from the wide gash. Even to my untrained layman's eye the amount of blood looks remarkably small and his long hair barely sticks to the gore. As I watch transfixed, the blood flow stops completely.

The three men notice the movement and stare in silent disbelief. Any self-respecting executioner with an ounce of pride in his work would now start to wonder if he's losing his touch. This guy certainly is, judging by the look on his face. One of the other would-be executioners is crying ecstatically. He has pissed himself.

The solitary eye of the murdered man is once again level with the camera, and he's smiling, but it's not a smile you'd expect to find on the face of Christ. This smile is ancient and dark and filthy. It's the smile of death and decay and the suffering of little children. It's the smile of all the atrocities committed in the name of religion and a promise of nothing but more of the same.

He flexes his arms and his hands are no longer bound behind his back and he preaches to the camera like a first-rate televangelist. His single eye locks on mine beneath the bloodied brow, the iris an almost unearthly light blue.

"... I am the Lord resurrected, I am the word retold. I am Alpha and Omega. Mine is the kingdom of God, and mine is the vengeance. Bow down before me and worship, for the day of judgement is nigh and the time for repentance is over. To each his just end, to the righteous, as to those weighed and found wanting. Rejoice, and let this be a message of unity for the lambs of the true flock. The man-god has once more been slain, and once again he stands resurrected. The armies of the Goat are approaching but a new kingdom is rising to stand against them, and this time there will be no forgiveness for the enemies of God." He gets up from the floor in a single fluid move, like a trained dancer or a martial artist and turns on his captors. The camera is knocked

over, the lens cracks and the image freezes, but the sound plays on.

It's the stuff nightmares are made of.

Something tells me this is not going to be a rescue operation. Why the hell does Gray want this guy? And why do I get the feeling we might all be heading for a very exciting future?