

This science fiction novel explores alternate technological and societal paths in the far future, as well as the unchanging nature of humanity. Follow its main characters across astronomical units of space and take part in the evolution of their perspectives. Watch them change as they irreversibly alter the world they inhabit.

Morning, the Third Day

by Yev Bukovinsky

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MORNING,
THE
THIRD DAY



YEV BUKOVINSKY

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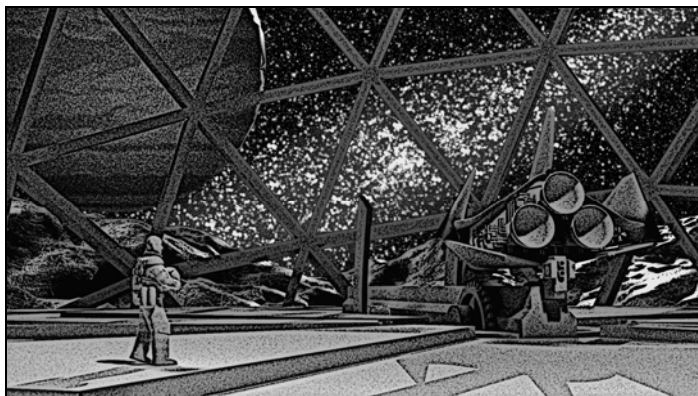
First Edition



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Dawn

He woke up when the gravity beds began their gentle deceleration. It was subtle, but after sleeping in them for the past few months, he could pick up the gradual change in forces acting on his body and the inherent slight disorientation. It took the sleep centrifuge a few minutes to stop revolving, and by that time, Aquila had already slipped into his skin-tight work coveralls, which felt cold and slick on the inside. The material they were made of was designed to conduct body heat away when the wearer overheated and keep it in when the outside temperature became

Morning, the Third Day

uncomfortably cold. The inevitable metallic groan of the reveille signal did not take him by surprise.

After he got over the initial discomfort, he felt more or less awake. The outer shell of his bed swung open and he pushed himself out. He sat up and stretched - it felt good with the lightness he was experiencing.

All around the room, people were getting dressed, yawning. Some were smiling and talking to each other, while others, Aquila included, bore sour or blank expressions on their faces. The ring, in which his bed was slotted, hung three meters from the floor - about half-way to the top of the cylinder. He let go of the bunk and floated to the floor in Hibernis' weak gravity, gently breaking the descent with his feet. The cacophony of voices and chuckles was getting louder, so Aquila decided to leave. He stretched one last time and turned on the magnetic mesh on his coveralls, which imitated the normal gravity. That imitation was not perfect, meaning it was necessary to augment it by time spent in the rotating cylinders in various poses. This served to prevent the heart and connective tissues from degenerating, and to get them accustomed to increased loads the body would experience back home - whenever that would happen.

He went into the hexagonal corridor connecting his sleep centrifuge to the central hub of the living quarters.

It was a rare occurrence, but that day, the dawn actually coincided with the reveille. Through the thick rad-filter windows he could see the nearby failed star, Vespere, rising over Hibernis, with its faint indigo glow reflecting off the glacial surface of the tiny frigid world. It refracted in the translucent cracks of the landscape like giant prisms, luminescent in dull green, blue and purple hues. There was no atmosphere on Hibernis, but the microscopic ice particles suspended above its surface by static electricity from the radiation, created a faint but colorful aurora around the rim of Vespere, which was presently creeping its way from beneath the horizon.

The failed star was a ghostly shape, cruising silently through the Void for eons, alone and dark. It received very little light from the system's parent star, the blue giant Matutinus, which would not rise above the horizon for hours. At that distance, it seemed only barely brighter than the surrounding stars, but it managed to cast a pale glow on the icy rock Hibernis whenever it wrestled that patch of cold and desolate realm away from Vespere.

Aquila spent most of his days with the number machines in the ice-mining complex with no windows, so the dawn was a welcome sight. He never before considered the icy lifeless rock beautiful until that moment. But then again, beauty was a rare occurrence in the eternal void of existence, he thought. He did not have much time, or desire for that matter, to slow down and take in the world around him. If he did it too often, he figured, the lack of pretty much anything substantiating his dragging existence would drive him insane, or maybe even force him to join the ranks of those mindless freaks – the Incorruptibles – as the priests called them. But that moment was different – the view did not have to substantiate its existence to Aquila, and he was happy to just stare at it for a while, if only to flash the glare of the artificial light out of his retinas before he had to come back to it.

He looked at the *caelologue* on his wrist. The bronze-colored face showed that there were only a few hours before he had to leave the ice-mining colony. Behind the little disks depicting various stellar bodies around Vespere, Aquila could see the tiny gears spinning, and Hibernis slowly catching up to Daedalus. In a few hours, they would be in the perfect position for Aquila to fly to Daedalus without wasting

too much of his fuel quota. It also showed Vespere being roughly perpendicular to the little notch representing the colony – the dawn he was seeing through the window.

He headed to the canteen, where he grabbed a nutrient pellet and some water, found an empty table and sat down. The water in the chalice danced around in tall waves, slowly, shooting large droplets upward when two of the waves met, in a rather peculiar manner. The canteen was a cupola, built in a mosaic of thick triangular windows, connected by a metal support structure. By then, the faintly purple glowing Vespere was well above the horizon. It appeared as a blooming halo, with a maroon, almost black, core – the effect of the rad-filter matrix. It stopped most of the higher-energy photons - everything stronger than ultraviolet - while letting ambient and most visible light pass through. Every object and person in the canteen was enveloped by indigo-colored shafts of light, extending from the failed star, casting shadows onto the dusty air. It felt like being inside an amethyst.

A worker at a nearby table accidentally pushed his chalice off the edge, but managed to catch it, scooping the water back into the chalice in mid-air, and put it back on the table. His companions laughed,

commenting about how much more skill this stunt would have required in a stronger gravity.

Aquila then proceeded to unwrap his nutrient pellet, which tasted like a piece of damp paper seasoned with throat medicine tablets. This was the standard across all colonies. Even more so in the less prosperous regions of their home world, where the Global Poverty Committee had intervened to prevent famine. This fact did not make it taste any better though. He washed down the mildly artificial flavor with liberal gulps of water and started making his way through the tables with groups of people, who were overcoming the meager meal by conversations and attempts at camaraderie. They were discussing everything, from the theme of the upcoming morning mass, with which every single work day started, to the details of their professional work. Some were caught up in arguing over the meaning of humanity's existence, while others joked about their outright disdain towards anyone not involved in the operation of mining machinery – and there was a large contingent of support staff to detest. It was interesting to observe how people get involved in petty rivalries, despite having the thoughts of everything grand and divine almost beaten into them since childhood. Perhaps life was indeed a struggle to overcome

oneself for the good of humanity, as the Hegemon would always assure the Nation during his address for the New Cycle celebration. As the head cleric would speak, the Nation would nod and vow to themselves and the Divine to work more and complain less, and to not listen to those unbelievers, like Aquila, who seek only to undermine. The truth, however, was that the unbelievers have long since stopped talking – out of fear or because they had given up – and quietly blended into the masses.

The mining colony was not a very populous place, as most of the work was done by large rigs. The drilling and extracting arms of the enormous machines, tens of human heights in size, experienced even less stress in a vacuum and weak gravity, than they were designed to easily withstand. On his way to the hangar, he could feel the vibrations of the nearby mining apparatus. Through one of the windows, he saw the mechanisms working, kicking up masses of dust and tiny needles of ice. The needles formed glowing circles of multicolored light, echoing the shades of the failed star above.

He passed through another one of those hexagonal corridors, still admiring the dawn. Hibernis rotated around its axis slowly, with the day lasting about fifty hours. In this way, it was unlike all other worlds

around Vespere, which were tidally locked to it, always facing the failed star with the same side. Hibernis, on the other hand, drew a more eccentric ellipse around it, which put it at a 3:2 rotation-orbit resonance – for every two orbits it would spin around its axis three times. That, along with its peculiar location in the system, caused for some unique stellar dances - two dawns followed by two dusks, or the day of one star would then yield its reign to the other. When Hibernis was on Vespere's far side, the parent star Matutinus would be eclipsed by it, turning the already barren landscape of the frigid moon into a dim, ghostly realm, lit only by the faint indigo glow of Vespere. It seemed like a grim image of the afterlife. A fitting place for the dead to haunt.

The hangar was located atop a separate tower that rose thirty meters above the rest of the complex. It housed all means of off-world communication. There was no *ascensor* to the dome, only a staircase and an emergency ladder. After a moment of deliberation, Aquila turned off the magnetic mesh and headed up the ladder in long jumps, bypassing large sections of it on the way. The idea sounded good in his mind, but despite the gravity being weak, he still needed to give his body considerable momentum to pull this off smoothly. About halfway through, his arms got so

tired that he had to proceed at a normal ladder pace for a while. After this struggle with innovation in methods of micro-gravity transportation, he was finally inside the hangar, drawing confused and ridiculing looks of the staff there. Pointing his gaze in a direction containing no human beings, he continued towards the ship that was set out for his journey. There were half a dozen tons of water ice he needed to carry to Daedalus, so he was given a larger transport vehicle. It had a very tight one-man cockpit, a small cargo bay and a bidirectional main thruster array. A Corvus X5 craft, notorious for its horrible air filters and only enough fuel to accelerate to maybe 50 kilometers per second – definitely unfit for longer flights, but perfect for getting around between nearby stellar bodies and space stations. The water ice was already loaded in the cargo bay, or rather, the cargo bay was already attached to the craft – the vessel had slots for bays of different sizes, which allowed for different kinds of cargo to be strapped on. Overall, the vehicle looked like the head of some bird of prey he had seen in old *aetoscripts*. Except there was only one large eye of the canopy, and the nostrils – retro thruster vents – were farther apart and lower on the sides of the beak. It was clamped onto the launch catapult with its landing struts folded, and the rear of

the craft raised higher than the front to allow space for the cargo.

After a thorough visual inspection of the thrusters and control module components, he was content with its overall condition.

Aquila submitted a request for a fuel tablet to the hangar quartermaster and received it surprisingly fast – the wrinkled, gray-haired, sixteen-year-old man with a disquietingly self-content look on his face, must have been in a great mood. Maybe he was close to retiring and in sweet anticipation of one final trip back to Cunabula Spei. Either way, he must have been the oldest man on Hibernis, and perhaps even the oldest one Aquila had ever encountered.

The fuel tablet was encased in a large metal box. It was probably heavier than it seemed in that gravity, and under normal conditions, it would have to be carried by two people. There were two fuel types in it – ten grams of antimatter and about ten kilos of solid metallic hydrogen.

The rest of the weight was occupied by carbon nanotubes, which served as electromagnetic traps for individual antiprotons encased in them, keeping the antimatter from interacting with absolutely anything else in the container. It was the safest way to store the fuel, which made the possibility of explosion

highly unlikely. But if it did occur, there was more than enough power in a single fuel tablet to level the colony. And if the other tablets produced a secondary explosion, it would probably shift Hibernis' orbit by a few thousandths of a degree.

The dust of nanotubules would be injected into a laser grid, compromising the containment and allowing antimatter to react with the carbon. The resulting charged particles would then be accelerated by a strong electromagnetic field, along with sublimated metallic hydrogen, ionized by gamma rays, which were a byproduct of matter-antimatter annihilation.

He made his way across the hangar to the vehicle and closed the air-tight gate, separating himself from the rest of the building in Dome C. The box fit into a slot, which produced a characteristic click once it was properly installed.

Aquila again turned off the magnetic mesh and jumped up to grab the handrail under the hatch. He pulled himself up with ease, and slid into the narrow cockpit, snaking his body into the pilot's seat. He maneuvered only with his left hand, which was still gripping the handrail. Once seated, he flipped the main power switches, turning on the vessel's navigational gearbox and other instruments. After

holding the startup button for three seconds, the engine started to hum, with lasers and various EM-conduits powering up. The matter-antimatter drive electrogram showed up on the cathode ray monitor in the cockpit. He procured the punch cards prepared earlier from his kneeboard, and inserted those into the gyroscope-stabilized navigation projector. Finally, he pulled the hatch closed and started the pressurization. A hiss of air from the internal pressure control system signaled the completion of his start-up sequence. Once he had manually aligned the navigation gearbox, all systems were ready for flight.

The shortwave communicator was turned to the Dome C frequency. Aquila pushed the talk button and requested takeoff clearance. The suggested course vector appeared on the output panels of the instruments fed by the gearbox – the horizon ball aligned with the current attitude, the heading indicators jumped to their proper positions, with a white line across the instrument pointing in the direction of the radio tower. An orange light from the gearbox projector appeared on the collimator.

Dome C filled with a loud roar of the air pumps, and the pressure outside started to drop. The sound slowly faded and became more of a wheeze. The only indication that whatever made the noise was still hard

at work, were the slight tremors reverberating all over the hangar. Then the wheezing sound disappeared completely. Vibrations continued for a few seconds and then stopped as well. The vessel was in a vacuum. With another tremor, the dome started to open, revealing the darkness above.

The coupling indicator light turned to green and Aquila felt a sudden bone-crushing jolt of the hangar's launch catapult. It threw him at a 45 degree angle to the ground, giving him enough forward momentum to drift for a few minutes. Daedalus was still far in front of him, looking like a pale beige marble in the distance, with a violet rim on the side illuminated by Vespere, and a white rim on the other side, lit by Matutinus. He shifted the forward thrust to quarter power and left it in this position for almost a minute. Once the thruster was off, the Corvus X5 was only slightly above orbital velocity, and drifted across the void towards the horizon. Of course, the horizon kept moving away from it – the perpetual chase of orbital flight.

The cockpit was unprotected from the radiation given off by the auroras at the poles of the failed star, but the hull was thick enough to block almost anything. Aquila touched the attitude controller and a momentary violet flash from the thrusters gave the

craft some rotational momentum. He wanted to flip it upside down, presenting the hull to the incoming radiation. Then, he canceled out the movement with the same attitude thrusters, Aquila found himself staring up at the surface of the icy world drifting above him. Grey, blue and white craters and fissures soon began to fill with an indigo glow with cyan, and even green, overtones. Colors and reflections chased each other from hill to hill, dancing gleefully over the surface of the dead moon. There was something hypnotizing about the sight. The frigid desert filled with a semblance of life, even if it was only his mind. He started listening to the silence, which somehow was louder than the humming of the cooling fans inside the cockpit and even than his own thoughts. Several minutes had passed by the time the vessel had reached the farthest point above the surface - the apoapsis - and started to gradually fall closer to Hibernis again. The periapsis happened to be on the side facing away from Daedalus. With a flip of a dial, the star pattern from the second punch card projected onto the collimator. Once it matched the actual star field in front of him, Aquila conducted another burn, accelerating to escape velocity and setting the ship on an intercept trajectory with Daedalus. He adjusted the

attitude to face prograde and opened up another nutrient pellet. It was going to be a long flight.

Hibernis' gravity and motion added a tiny bit of extra acceleration, and flung the craft towards Daedalus. It would drift in the direction for a while, until the mysterious, bluish white world would pull it towards itself. As inertia carried him further away from Hibernis, Aquila started to see the accretion disk around Vespere. The wide ring, encompassing a radius of several failed stars, composed of ice and rocks, grinding against each other, sometimes spawning weird little worlds, with characters not at all unlike those of people inhabiting them. All of them cold and dark. Some lifeless, some teeming with a violent, though frigid, weather. All merely basking in the rays of a failed star, gravitating towards one another, ultimately resulting in their eventual end, leaving no trace for the universe to remember them by.

He was glad he had an acquaintance on Daedalus. A strange chap – Virès, unlike Aquila, was much more open and willing to trust people. To him, Humanity was a fascinating thing, with the greatest of the divine gifts – a sentience. For good or ill, they were unique, unlike any other living thing. And unlike the other organisms, which showed clear signs of

change over time from simpler to more complex, there was no clear precursor to them – a fact he could drone on about for hours.

To Aquila, it meant that all life could be set in motion by a rather simple process, given enough time. Divinity was somewhere far beyond these elementary acts of chance, perhaps even beyond the Universe itself, and certainly beyond Aquila's understanding. So he left this speculation alone in his conviction that all of human knowledge was derived by nobody other than the humans themselves, over thousands of years. And the clergy's doctrine of divine inspiration of knowledge contradicted itself in that an omnipotent being would hardly bother teaching the pathetic mortals. Especially with their supposed intellect being plagued by animalistic drives for competition and dominance, giving basis to anger, vanity and envy.

Virès, on the other hand, was a firm believer in the inspired truths, and therefore considered the Creator to be an entity of incomprehensible intelligence, compared to any human's wildest aspirations. He left them to merely feed on the fruit of knowledge, provided on a proverbial silver platter. While that was consistent with the Temple's teachings, Virès thought that if every single person on their home planet was

adept at sciences, their very understanding of the Creator would be much more complete.

Despite their differences – a cheerful welcoming of possibilities contrasted against frank apocalyptic nihilism - it came down to the fact that aside from Virès, there was not a single person within astronomical units, whom Aquila could trust. Virès was not stupid, and knew when to keep his mouth shut – a quality Aquila valued very much, even if Virès' unconditional friendliness to everyone annoyed him to no end. They had known each other for almost a year. So long seemed to have passed since the time he thought Virès to be no different from the crowds of off-world career-men and gullible faithfals. But the problem was with Aquila himself – if it was not for overbearing isolation, he would not have bothered opening up to anyone – especially not to someone as annoyingly joyful as Virès. And presently, he could not believe he was actually looking forward to seeing him.

Cradle of Hope

The deep-blue horizon was only birthing the bright disk of Matutinus, and the city of Diella was still in slumber, when three hooded figures made their way down the staircase to the central courtyard of the Temple Tower. It was the only place in Diella that was alive with activity this early in the day, but isolated from its streets by almost a kilometer of altitude. The figure in the front was dressed in a black, glistening robe, with thin golden stripes marking the edges of the fabric. The other two, walking slightly behind the first figure, were clothed in dark gray robes from a similar material. Casual conversations among the scholars and clerics on the large deck seemed to cease and eyes were pointed downwards in reverence as the figures walked past. One unsuspecting young monk, caught in a lively discussion with a dimension-philosopher about the nature of matter and energy, failed to notice his conversation partner's glares in the direction of the figures approaching from behind. He was startled when their robes almost brushed against his as they walked past. It took him a moment to recover his ability to speak, and by then he had completely forgot his argument.

The figures continued down a path lined with arches and streams of green water in algal bloom, trickling down the spiral grooves in stone pillars, into pools at either side of the path. It seemed as if the platform was at the top of the world, with far away landscapes opening to the observing eye in full grandeur. Distant mountains, glazed with the rays of the rising star, blue and indigo colored morning sky, the great Smaragdus Lake to the north, and a smaller one, Tranquillitatem, to the south-east. The lakes were teeming with life, which painted them in green and orange colors. A few thousand kilometers to the west was a giant arsenic-rich lake in the middle of the rocky desert called Inanis. And just beyond the horizon to the east, was the only ocean on the planet, with rivers of blue, orange and yellow making their way to it through the crimson moss lands of the tropics. Finally, far to the south, in the temperate zone, was the one thing blocking the systematic expansion of Humanity's endeavors – the impassable Southern Forest. It occupied a third of the planet's total landmass, and was crowned by the tallest mountain range, the pinnacle of which was the behemoth Kurgal – an ancient mountain with an ancient name, the meaning of which had been lost to ages. Cunabula Spei was a gorgeous world.

Aside from the natural beauty of the surrounding lands, there were imposing achievements of humanity, such as the colossal carbon traps and fusion grids surrounding the city. Once the curfew would lift, the streets would also fill with people going about their day, building a brighter future in the glory of the Creator - the messengers of which, of course, were the clerics.

There was an air of calm about the décor of the temple. It was a great honor for clerics to practice and study in that building. It was the holiest place of worship and law-making, supposedly built by the Ancients themselves. Standing on that platform, in the majestic solitude of an eagle atop a mountain, one could not help but feel thankful to be alive in that very moment.

The door opened and the figures were greeted by another. One of the three arrivals removed his hoods to reveal a man with long gray hair, shaved temples, a sharp nose, and a stern, confident look on a face covered with divine symbols. The other two hoods uncovered younger, square-jawed *ordinarii*, who stared straight ahead of themselves with wide-open eyes and otherwise expressionless faces. The figure at the door did not remove his hood, and instead was the first one to speak:

“Walk in the Path of Light, your Holiness.”

“And you walk with me, Brother Nix. Has the gathering begun?” Asked the gray-haired man, placing the locks adorned in ceremonial jewelry in a more natural position. Both his jewelry and his face depicted the “Eye of the Void” symbol worn only by Divine Brothers of the Order.

“The past week was filled with deliberations, as per the transcripts delivered to you yesterday. But these matters require the highest level of authority and the Council is divided.”

“I fear I will not side with majority this time,” he said, walking through the gate down the hall towards the auditorium.

“But why, Your Holiness? This case presents an obvious solution. Only the young fools from Tenebris’ kin, along with some lenient brothers from northern districts think otherwise. Specifically Brother Potestas, who has long wanted to undermine your authority.”

“He will not be expecting me to play into his hands, so he is not the one to benefit from my decision.”

Something was clearly being left unsaid. Nix did not like being kept in the dark from the Hegemon’s plans. Even more so if those were contrary to his own.

But His Holiness Calidus had an agenda on this issue and there was nobody in power to stop him. At least not at the time.

Through the doors, the two could hear a tandem of fierce arguments, sounding like a sea storm breaking over a rocky shore.

“... but the dissemination had been prevented, all compromising materials confiscated and –“

“It is the intention that bears the responsibility, not the success of the crime! This madman intentionally mistranslated the ancient texts and wanted to use them to cripple our authority. Any authority, for that matter! He brings only chaos everywhere he goes. Have you never spoken to him? He spouts nonsense of some prophecy and birth of a new world, of other Nations drifting among the stars and promises of technologies that will transform Humanity, hidden within the knowledge wells at the Colossus.”

“But that is exactly what we have been finding at the Colossus for centuries! Everything we were able to decode changed the way we travel and gather resources! What if there still lies some higher understanding we have yet to decipher?”

“Are you mad? We are at the apogee of our technological advancement! There cannot possibly be anything more complex than what we have already

achieved. Especially since it is written in the Holy Scripts that one cannot move faster than the aether-waves, and that time will stop for the one so daring! The antimatter drives with perfect matter-to-energy conversion, would take us to the nearest star in twenty years. My scholars interpret it as the Maker's will to confine us to only one star, as to not interfere with His other creations. This means that no other offspring of the Ancients exist in the Universe. High time you abandon your childish dreams, Brother Potestas!"

"You are the fool. This same speech I saw in records at the turn of every century. There have always been narrow-minded people in the way of technological progress. *Tenebris* is not the only heretic here, for you deny us the God-given obligation to look to the stars!"

"You may dare to call me heretic, but you admit that *Tenebris* is one. And as a heretic, he deserves to be cast away in torment for eternity, or at least removed from existence altogether!"

"His only crime is that he made his own conclusions and vowed to spread them without review by, and in damage to, the Council – a heinous deed, but one unworthy of Hall of the Damned. And then again, with patrons like you, there was hardly a chance of him ever being heard by the Council! So

maybe this dire act was the only way in his mind to gain notice! It was you and your herd of hard-headed ignoramuses who pushed him to the edge of heresy!”

“Perhaps once he is confined to the fate of the sinners, you will be appointed to tend to him for the rest of your days for saying such things!”

Nix’s face was shrouded by his hood, but his demeanor gave off a faint air of excitement and self-content. Perhaps Calidus would change his mind – his authority as the Hegemon - the supreme ruler of the whole Nation - is unquestionable, but not infinite.

His Holiness walked down a narrow bridge to the small circular dais suspended dead in the center of the auditorium. The moment the light rays of the ceiling prism touched the golden ornaments of Calidus’ attire, the whole place suddenly fell into complete silence.

“Walk in the Path of Light!” Chanted a rather coherent chorus of voices, considering how different all of these people and their intentions were.

“And you walk with me, brethren!” Responded Calidus with his thunderous voice, untainted by age. It rolled through the grand murky sphere of the auditorium immediately silencing any whispers and murmurs. “We have gathered here to decide the fate of our lost soul by the name Tenebris. Coincidental with his name, he slipped into darkness and

distributed materials, which could harm the Church's credibility and contest our divine right to guide our flock. After examining the case, my decision is this – Brother Tenebris is to be found guilty of misleading and manipulating beliefs, and turning the righteous away from Light, in complete disregard for the Oath. Quoting from paragraph seventeen of the Lawful Conduct - any heresy, be it by word, act or thought, committed in full knowledge by a Brother, is a violation against Humanity as a whole and will be punished accordingly at the discretion of the Hegemon.”

The murmurs resumed, and this time, the notes of approval were audible in the majority of voices. Calidus held a pause to let his words sink in.

“However, we must take into consideration that despite his wicked crime against the faithful, and a very liberal interpretation of the scriptures he discovered, with a clear intent to misguide his flock and undermine our authority in the eyes of Humanity, he has produced some remarkable translations from the ancient tongues. He still stands as an unparalleled scholar in the field of the Ancient arts, despite his young age. Many philosophers in this very room referenced his work in development of hydrogen dynamos. It was he who built on the research of

Brother Clarus, who deciphered the formulae for electromagnetic containment of antimatter reactors, and refined the process to the standards we see today.”

Remarkably less enthusiasm was heard in the murmurs that time. Potestas was dissatisfied with where the decision was going, as he missed a chance to take a jab at His Holiness, which he was planning since the opening of the case.

Unbeknownst to himself, Nix led the council to believe Calidus would take a more radical solution to the problem. But the hooded silhouette did not betray his feelings.

One young but energetic monk rose up from his seat into the light, emanating from the center of the room. It swept just above the heads of the sitting clergymen, as to illuminate anyone who stands up to speak, while the rest are hidden in shadows. Forgetting any semblance of reverence, he shouted:

“He is a heretic! He disgraced us and sinned against the Creator himself! We do not care if the discovered a star-engine, he must pay for his malev-“ one of the older clerics reached for his shoulder and he was pulled back to the seat, disappearing into the murk. At this time the young man looked up, meeting Calidus’ frigid gaze head-on, and immediately

lowered his, with shivers gripping his breath. The Hegemon continued:

“As the heretic Tenebris is dangerous and undoubtedly malevolent in the eyes of the Temple, his life on this world is over forever. I hereby sentence him to eternal confinement in the dungeon on Gemini, with the murderers and dissidents alike, for whom death would be too kind an end. He will spend the rest of his existence serving us, tending after arch-sinners there, in prayers for forgiveness.”

“He must join them, as a sinner he is!” Some voices were calling out, but the majority were too concerned about their comfort to interdict His Holiness, while Potestas’ party seemingly got what they wanted. Only a few opinionated hot heads still wanted to keep the caucus lively. But the decision was made, and they subsided under the disapproving glares of the rest of the Council.

After all, the fate of a convicted murderer was not something to be envied, and neither was the service of looking after them.

The better portion of the next hour was taken up by the arrangements to read the sentence to the accused at a later date, and the heretic’s departure to Gemini. There, he would spend the remainder of his worldly life, serving as an example to others, as a

guardian of a dark cold place known as the Hall of the Damned.

After the council was dismissed for a short break, which most spent strolling in the algal garden, Nix, somewhat nervously adjusting one of the black tubes connecting the grotesque pustules on his skin to a medical apparatus under his robe, approached His Holiness. The rough yellowish face stared at the Hegemon from beneath the hood with a sly smile.

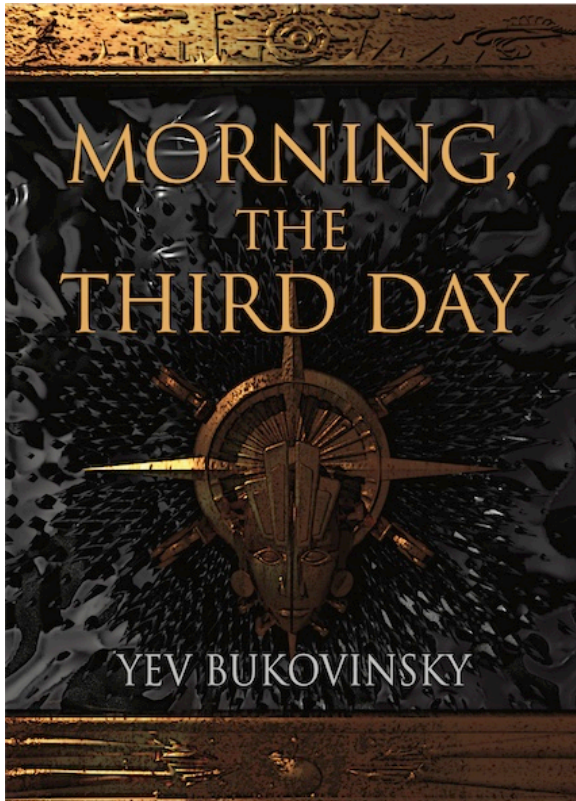
“Gemini will be a suiting place for the heretic. It is a pity you decided to make him a servant there and not one of the damned.” the raspy half-whisper was very fitting to his general appearance.

“Brother Nix, have I not made it clear that he can still be useful?”

“Yes, Your Holiness, I am not arguing your decision. I merely wish to voice my disdain over his perverse actions.”

“Speaking of perverse actions, Brother - It is fitting that as my potential successor, you serve as an example to the lost and the righteous alike. Rumors of your acolytes occasionally disappearing have reached my ears. I am not pleased. These girls are given to you to serve in the praise of the Omnipotent One, and I would advise you to at least keep them safe. I cannot imagine a reverend man like you being involved in

their deaths, or any other disgusting acts committed to them, and I assume whoever is responsible should be intelligent enough to somehow reward them for silence instead of just removing them. A blood trail always leads to the killer, you know.”



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