## And Ministers of Grace

## Tad Williams

The seed whispers, sings, offers, instructs. A wise man of the homeworld once said, “Human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.” Everything is possible for a committed man or woman. The universe is in our reach.

Visit the Orgasmium—now open 24 hours. We take Senior Credits. The Orgasmium—where YOU come first!

Your body temperature is normal. Your stress levels are normal, tending toward higher than normal. If this trend continues, you are recommended to see a physician.

I’m almost alive! And I’m your perfect companion—I’m entirely portable. I want to love you. Come try me. Trade my personality with friends. Join the fun!

Comb properties now available. Consult your local environment node. Brand new multi-family and single-family dwellings, low down payment with government entry loans...!

Commodity prices are up slightly on the Sackler Index at this hour, despite a morning of sluggish trading. The prime minister will detail her plans to reinvigorate the economy in her speech to Parliament...

A wise woman of the homeworld once said, “Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see the shadow.”

His name is Lamentation Kane and he is a Guardian of Covenant—a holy assassin. His masters have placed a seed of blasphemy in his head. It itches like unredeemed sin and fills his skull with foul pagan noise.

The faces of his fellow travelers on the landing shuttle are bored and vacuous. How can these infidels live with this constant murmur in their heads? How can they survive and stay sane with the constant pinpoint flashing of attention signals at the edge of vision, the raw, sharp pulse of a world bristling and burbling with information?

It is like being stuck in a hive of insects, Kane thinks—insects doing their best to imitate human existence without understanding it. He longs for the sweet, singular voice of Spirit, soothing as cool water on inflamed skin. Always before, no matter the terrors of his mission, that voice has been with him, soothing him, reminding him of his holy purpose. All his life, Spirit has been with him. All his life until now.

Humble yourselves therefore under the strong hand of God, so that He may raise you up in due time.

Sweet and gentle like spring rain. Unlike this unending drizzle of filth, each word Spirit has ever spoken has been precious, bright like silver.

Cast all your burdens on Him, for He cares for you. Be in control of yourself and alert. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

Those were the last words Spirit spoke to him before the military scientists silenced the Word of God and replaced it with the endless, godless prattle of the infidel world, Archimedes.

For the good of all mankind, they assured him: Lamentation Kane must sin again so that one day all men would be free to worship God. Besides, the elders pointed out, what was there for him to fear? If he succeeds and escapes Archimedes the pagan seed will be removed and Spirit will speak in his thoughts again. If he does not escape—well, Kane will hear the true voice of God at the foot of His mighty throne. Well done, my good and faithful servant...

Beginning descent. Please return to pods, the pagan voices chirp in his head, prickling like nettles. Thank you for traveling with us. Put all food and packaging in the receptacle and close it. This is your last chance to purchase duty-free drugs and alcohol. Cabin temperature is 20 degrees centigrade. Pull the harness snug. Beginning descent. Cabin pressure stable. Lander will detach in twenty seconds. Ten seconds. Nine seconds. Eight seconds...

It never ends, and each godless word burns, prickles, itches.

Who needs to know so much about nothing?

A child of one of the Christian cooperative farms on Covenant’s flat and empty plains, he was brought to New Jerusalem as a candidate for the elite Guardian unit. When he saw for the first time the white towers and golden domes of his planet’s greatest city, Kane had been certain that Heaven would look just that way. Now, as Hellas City rises up to meet him, capitol of great Archimedes and stronghold of his people’s enemies, it is bigger than even his grandest, most exaggerated memories of New Jerusalem—an immense sprawl with no visible ending, a lumpy white and gray and green patchwork of complex structures and orderly parks and lacy polyceramic web skyscrapers that bend gently in the cloudy upper skies like an oceanic kelp forest. The scale is astounding. For the first time ever in his life, Lamentation Kane has a moment of doubt—not in the rightness of his cause, but in the certainty of its victory.

But he reminds himself of what the Lord told Joshua: Behold I have given into thy hands Jericho, and the king thereof, and all the valiant men...

Have you had a Creemy Crunch today? It blares through his thoughts like a klaxon. You want it! You need it! Available at any food outlet. Creemy Crunch makes cream crunchy! Don’t be a bitch, Mom! Snag me a CC—or three!

The devil owns the Kingdom of Earth. A favorite saying of one of his favorite teachers. But even from his high throne he cannot see the City of Heaven.

Now with a subdermal glow-tattoo in every package! Just squeeze it in under the skin—and start shining!

Lord Jesus, protect me in this dark place and give me strength to do your work once more, Kane prays. I serve You. I serve Covenant.

It never stops, and only gets more strident after the lander touches down and they are ushered through the locks into the port complex.

Remember the wise words, air quality is in the low thirties on the Teng Fuo scale today, first time visitors to Archimedes go here, returning go there, where to stand, what to say, what to have ready. Restaurants, news feeds, information for transportation services, overnight accommodations, immigration law, emergency services, yammer yammer yammer until Kane wants to scream. He stares at the smug citizens of Archimedes around him and loathes every one of them. How can they walk and smile and talk to each other with this Babel in their heads, without God in their hearts?

Left. Follow the green tiles. Left. Follow the green tiles. They aren’t even people, they can’t be—just crude imitations. And the variety of voices with which the seed bedevils him! High-pitched, low-pitched, fast and persuasive, moderately slow and persuasive, adult voices, children’s voices, accents of a dozen sorts, most of which he can’t even identify and can barely understand. His blessed Spirit is one voice and one voice only and he longs for her desperately. He always thinks of Spirit as “her,” although it could just as easily be the calm, sweet voice of a male child. It doesn’t matter. Nothing as crass as earthly sexual distinctions matter, any more than with God’s holy angels. Spirit has been his constant companion since childhood, his advisor, his inseparable friend. But now he has a pagan seed in his brain and he may never hear her blessed voice again.

I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. That’s what Spirit told him the night he was baptized, the night she first spoke to him. Six years old. I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

He cannot think of that. He will not think of anything that might undermine his courage for the mission, of course, but there is a greater danger: some types of thoughts, if strong enough, can trigger the port’s security E-Grams, which can perceive certain telltale patterns, especially if they are repeated.

A wise man of the homeworld once said, “Man is the measure of all things...” The foreign seed doesn’t want him thinking of anything else, anyway

Have you considered living in Holyoake Harbor? another voice asks, cutting through the first. Only a twenty-minute commute to the business district, but a different world of ease and comfort.

...And of things which are not, that they are not, the first voice finishes, swimming back to the top. Another wise fellow made the case more directly: “The world holds two classes of men—intelligent men without religion, and religious men without intelligence.”

Kane almost shivers despite the climate controls. Blur your thoughts, he reminds himself. He does his best to let the chatter of voices and the swirl of passing faces numb and stupefy him, making himself a beast instead of a man, the better to hide from God’s enemies.

He passes the various mechanical sentries and the first two human guard posts as easily as he hoped he would—his military brethren have prepared his disguise well. He is in line at the final human checkpoint when he catches a glimpse of her, or at least he thinks it must be her—a small, brown-skinned woman sagging between two heavily armored port security guards who clutch her elbows in a parody of assistance. For a moment their eyes meet and her dark stare is frank before she hangs her head again in a convincing imitation of shame. The words from the briefing wash up in his head through the fog of Archimedean voices—Martyrdom Sister—but he does his best to blur them again just as quickly. He can’t imagine any word that will set off the E-Grams as quickly as “Martyrdom.”

The final guard post is more difficult, as it is meant to be. The sentry, almost faceless behind an array of enhanced light scanners and lenses, does not like to see Arjuna on Kane’s itinerary, his last port of call before Archimedes. Arjuna is not a treaty world for either Archimedes or Covenant, although both hope to make it so, and is not officially policed by either side.

The official runs one of his scanners over Kane’s itinerary again. “Can you tell me why you stopped at Arjuna, Citizen McNally?”

Kane repeats the story of staying there with his cousin who works in the mining industry. Arjuna is rich with platinum and other minerals, another reason both sides want it. At the moment, though, neither the Rationalists of Archimedes or the Abramites of Covenant can get any traction there: the majority of Arjuna’s settlers, colonists originally from the homeworld’s Indian subcontinent, are comfortable with both sides—a fact that makes both Archimedes and Covenant quite uncomfortable indeed.

The guard post official doesn’t seem entirely happy with Lamentation Kane’s explanation and is beginning to investigate the false personality a little more closely. Kane wonders how much longer until the window of distraction is opened. He turns casually, looking up and down the transparent u-glass cells along the far wall until he locates the one in which the brown-skinned woman is being questioned. Is she a Muslim? A Copt? Or perhaps something entirely different—there are Australian Aboriginal Jews on Covenant, remnants of the Lost Tribes movement back on the homeworld. But whoever or whatever she is doesn’t matter, he reminds himself: she is a sister in God and she has volunteered to sacrifice herself for the sake of the mission—his mission.

She turns for a moment and their eyes meet again through the warping glass. She has acne scars on her cheeks but she’s pretty, surprisingly young to be given such a task. He wonders what her name is. When he returns—if he returns—he will go to the Great Tabernacle in New Jerusalem and light a candle for her.

Brown eyes. She seems sad as she looks at him before turning back to the guards. Could that be true? The Martyrs are the most privileged of all during their time in the training center. And she must know she will be looking on the face of God Himself very soon. How can she not be joyful? Does she fear the pain of giving up her earthly body?

As the sentry in front of him seems to stare out at nothing, reading the information that marches across his vision, Lamentation Kane opens his mouth to say something—to make small-talk the way a real returning citizen of Archimedes would after a long time abroad, a citizen guilty of nothing worse than maybe having watched a few religious broadcasts on Arjuna—when he sees movement out of the corner of his eye. Inside the u-glass holding cell the young, brown-skinned woman lifts her arms. One of the armored guards lurches back from the table, half-falling, the other reaches out his gloved hand as though to restrain her, but his face has the hopeless, slack expression of a man who sees his own death. A moment later bluish flames run up her arms, blackening the sleeves of her loose dress, and then she vanishes in a flare of magnesium white light.

People are shrieking and diving away from the glass wall, which is now spiderwebbed with cracks. The light burns and flickers and the insides of the walls blacken with a crust of what Kane guesses must be human fat turning to ash.

A human explosion—nanobiotic thermal flare—that partially failed. That will be their conclusion. But of course, the architects of Kane’s mission didn’t want an actual explosion. They want a distraction.

The sentry in the guard post polarizes the windows and locks up his booth. Before hurrying off to help the emergency personnel fight the blaze that is already leaking clouds of black smoke into the concourse, he thrusts Kane’s itinerary into his hand and waves him through, then locks off the transit point.

Lamentation Kane would be happy to move on, even if he were the innocent traveler he pretends to be. The smoke is terrible, with the disturbing, sweet smell of cooked meat. What had her last expression been like? It is hard to remember anything except those endlessly deep, dark eyes. Had that been a little smile or is he trying to convince himself? And if it had been fear, why should that be surprising? Even the saints must have feared to burn to death.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...

Welcome back to Hellas, Citizen McNally! a voice in his head proclaims, and then the other voices swim up beneath it, a crowd, a buzz, an itch.

He does his best not to stare as the cab hurtles across the metroscape, but he cannot help being impressed by the sheer size of Archimedes’ first city. It is one thing to be told how many millions live there and to try to understand that it is several times the size of New Jerusalem, but another entirely to see the hordes of people crowding the sidewalks and skyways. Covenant’s population is mostly dispersed on pastoral settlements like the one on which Kane was raised, agrarian cooperatives that, as his teachers explained to him, keep God’s children close to the earth that nurtures them. Sometimes it is hard to realize that the deep, reddish soil he had spent his childhood digging and turning and nurturing was not the same soil as the Bible described. Once he even asked a teacher why, if God made Earth, the People of the Book had left it behind.

“God made all the worlds to be earth for His children,” the woman explained. “Just as He made all the lands of the old Earth, then gave them to different folk to have for their homes. But He always kept the sweetest lands, the lands of milk and honey, for the children of Abraham, and that’s why when we left earth He gave us Covenant.”

As he thinks about it now Kane feels a surge of warmth and loneliness commingled. It’s true that the hardest thing to do for love is to give up the beloved. At this moment, he misses Covenant so badly it is all he can do not to cry out. It is astounding in one as experienced as himself. God’s warriors don’t sigh, he tells himself sternly. They make others sigh instead. They bring lamentation to God’s enemies. Lamentation.

He exits the cab some distance from the safehouse and walks the rest of the way, floating in smells both familiar and exotic. He rounds the neighborhood twice to make sure he is not followed, then enters the flatblock, takes the slow but quiet elevator up to the eighteenth floor, and lets himself in with the key code. It looks like any other Covenant safehouse on any of the other colony worlds, cupboards well stocked with nourishment and medical supplies, little in the way of furniture but a bed and a single chair and a small table. These are not places of rest and relaxation, these are way stations on the road to Jericho.

It is time for him to change.

Kane fills the bathtub with water. He finds the chemical ice, activates a dozen packs, and tosses them in. Then he goes to the kitchen and locates the necessary mineral and chemical supplements. He pours enough water into the mixture to make himself a thick, bitter milkshake, and drinks it down while he waits for the water in the tub to cool. When the temperature has dropped far enough he strips naked and climbs in.

“You see, Kane,” one of the military scientists had explained, “we’ve reached a point where we can’t smuggle even a small hand-weapon onto Archimedes, let alone something useful, and they regulate their own citizens’ possession of weapons so thoroughly that we cannot chance trying to obtain one there. So we have gone another direction. We have created Guardians—human weapons. That is what you are, praise the Lord. It started in your childhood. That’s why you’ve always been different from your peers—faster, stronger, smarter. But we’ve come to the limit of what we can do with genetics and training. We need to give you what you need to make yourself into the true instrument of God’s justice. May He bless this and all our endeavors in His name. Amen.”

“Amen,” the Spirit in his head told him. “You are now going to fall asleep.”

“Amen,” said Lamentation Kane.

And then they gave him the first injection.

When he woke up that first time he was sore, but nowhere near as sore as he was the first time he activated the nanobiotes or “notes” as the scientists liked to call them. When the notes went to work, it was like a terrible sunburn on the outside and the inside both, and like being pounded with a roundball bat for at least an hour, and like lying in the road while a good-sized squadron of full-dress Holy Warriors marched over him.

In other words, it hurt.

Now, in the safehouse, he closes his eyes, turns down the babble of the Archimedes seed as far as it will let him, and begins to work.

It is easier now than it used to be, certainly easier than that terrible first time when he was so clumsy that he almost tore his own muscles loose from tendon and bone.

He doesn’t just flex, he thinks about where the muscles are that would flex if he wanted to flex them, then how he would just begin to move them if he were going to move them extremely slowly, and with that first thought comes the little tug of the cells unraveling their connections and re-knitting in different, more useful configurations, slow as a plant reaching toward the sun. Even with all this delicacy, his temperature rises and his muscles spasm and cramp, but not like the first time. That was like being born—no, like being judged and found wanting, as though the very meat of his earthly body was trying to tear itself free, as though devils pierced his joints with hot iron pitchforks. Agony.

Had the sister felt something like this at the end? Was there any way to open the door to God’s house without terrible, holy pain? She had brown eyes. He thinks they were sad. Had she been frightened? Why would Jesus let her be frightened, when even He had cried out on the cross?

I praise You, Lord, Lamentation Kane tells the pain. This is Your way of reminding me to pay attention. I am Your servant, and I am proud to put on Your holy armor.

It takes him at least two hours to finish changing at the best of times. Tonight, with the fatigue of his journey and long entry process and the curiously troubling effect of the woman’s martyrdom tugging at his thoughts, it takes him over three.

Kane gets out of the tub shivering, most of the heat dispersed and his skin almost blue-white with cold. Before wrapping the towel around himself he looks at the results of all his work. It’s hard to see any differences except for a certain broadness to his chest that was not there before, but he runs his fingers along the hard shell of his stomach and the sheath of gristle that now protects his windpipe and is satisfied. The thickening beneath the skin will not stop high-speed projectiles from close up, but they should help shed the energy of any more distant shot and will allow him to take a bullet or two from nearer and still manage to do his job. Trellises of springy cartilage strengthen his ankles and wrists. His muscles are augmented, his lungs and circulation improved mightily. He is a Guardian, and with every movement he can feel the holy modifications that have been given to him. Beneath the appearance of normality he is strong as Goliath, scaly and supple as a serpent.

He is starving, of course. The cupboards are full of powdered nutritional supplement drinks. He adds water and ice from the kitchen unit, mixes the first one up and downs it in a long swallow. He drinks five before he begins to feel full.

Kane props himself up on the bed—things are still sliding and grinding a little inside him, the last work of change just finishing—and turns the wall on. The images jump into life and the seed in his head speaks for them. He wills his way past sports and fashion and drama, all the unimportant gibberish with which these creatures fill their empty hours, until he finds a stream of current events. Because it is Archimedes, hive of Rationalist pagans, even the news is corrupted with filth, gossip, and whoremongering, but he manages to squint his way through the offending material to find a report on what the New Hellas authorities are calling a failed terrorist explosion at the port. A picture of the Martyrdom Sister flashes onto the screen—taken from her travel documents, obviously, anything personal in her face well hidden by her training—but seeing her again gives him a strange jolt, as though the notes that tune his body have suddenly begun one last, forgotten operation.

Nefise Erim, they call her. Not her real name, that’s almost certain, any more than Keenan McNally is his. Outcast, that’s her true name. Scorned—that could be her name too, as it could be his. Scorned by the unbelievers, scorned by the smug, faithless creatures who, like Christ’s ancient tormentors, fear the word of God so much they try to ban Him from their lives, from their entire planet! But God can’t be banned, not as long as one human heart remains alive to His voice. As long as the Covenant system survives, Kane knows, God will wield his mighty sword and the unbelievers will learn real fear.

Oh, please, Lord, grant that I may serve you well. Give us victory over our enemies. Help us to punish those who would deny You.

And just as he lifts this silent prayer, he sees her face on the screen. Not his sister in martyrdom, with her wide, deep eyes and dark skin. No, it is her—the devil’s mistress, Keeta Januari, Prime Minister of Archimedes.

His target.

Januari is herself rather dark skinned, he cannot help noticing. It is disconcerting. He has seen her before, of course, her image replayed before him dozens upon dozens of times, but this is the first time he has noticed a shade to her skin that is darker than any mere suntan, a hint of something else in her background beside the pale, Scandinavian forebears so obvious in her bone structure. It is as if the martyred sister Nefise has somehow suffused everything, even his target. Or is it that the dead woman has somehow crept into his thoughts so deeply that he is witnessing her everywhere?

If you can see it, you can eat it! He has mostly learned to ignore the horrifying chatter in his head, but sometimes it still reaches up and slaps his thoughts away. Barnstorm Buffet! We don’t care if they have to roll you out the door afterward—you’ll get your money’s worth!

It doesn’t matter what he sees in the prime minister, or thinks he sees. A shade lighter or darker means nothing. If the devil’s work out here among the stars has a face, it is the handsome, narrow-chinned visage of Keeta Januari, leader of the Rationalists. And if God ever wanted someone dead, she is that person.

She won’t be his first: Kane has sent eighteen souls to judgment already. Eleven of them were pagan spies or dangerous rabble-rousers on Covenant. One of those was the leader of a crypto-rationalist cult in the Crescent—the death was a favor to the Islamic partners in Covenant’s ruling coalition, Kane found out later. Politics. He doesn’t know how he feels about that, although he knows the late Doctor Hamoud was a doubter and a liar and had been corrupting good Muslims. Still...politics.

Five were infiltrators among the Holy Warriors of Covenant, his people’s army. Most of these had half-expected to be discovered, and several of them had resisted desperately.

The last two were a politician and his wife on the unaffiliated world of Arjuna, important Rationalist sympathizers. At his masters’ bidding Kane made it look like a robbery gone wrong instead of an assassination: this was not the time to make the Lord’s hand obvious in Arjuna’s affairs. Still, there were rumors and accusations across Arjuna’s public networks. The gossipers and speculators had even given the unknown murderer a nickname—the Angel of Death.

Dr. Prishrahan and his wife had fought him. Neither of them had wanted to die. Kane had let them resist even though he could have killed them both in a moment. It gave credence to the robbery scenario. But he hadn’t enjoyed it. Neither had the Prishrahans, of course.

He will avenge the blood of His servants, and will render vengeance to His adversaries, Spirit reminded him when he had finished with the doctor and his wife, and he understood. Kane’s duty is not to judge. He is not one of the flock, but closer to the wolves he destroys. Lamentation Kane is God’s executioner.

He is now cold enough from his long submersion that he puts on clothes. He is still tender in his joints as well. He goes out onto the balcony, high in the canyons of flatblocks pinpricked with illuminated windows, thousands upon thousands of squares of light. The immensity of the place still unnerves him a little. It’s strange to think that what is happening behind one little lighted window in this immensity of sparkling urban night is going to rock this massive world to its foundations.

It is hard to remember the prayers as he should. Ordinarily Spirit is there with the words before he has a moment to feel lonely. “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.”

But he does not feel comforted at this moment. He is alone.

“Looking for love?” The voice in his head whispers this time, throaty and exciting. A bright twinkle of coordinates flicker at the edge of his vision. “I’m looking for you...and you can have me almost nothing...”

He closes his eyes tight against the immensity of the pagan city.

Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God.

He walks to the auditorium just to see the place where the prime minister will speak. He does not approach very closely. It looms against the grid of light, a vast rectangle like an axe head smashed into the central plaza of Hellas City. He does not linger.

As he slides through the crowds it is hard not to look at the people around him as though he has already accomplished his task. What would they think if they knew who he was? Would they shrink back from the terror of the Lord God’s wrath? Or would a deed of such power and piety speak to them even through their fears?

I am ablaze with the light of the Lord, he wants to tell them. I have let God make me His instrument—I am full of glory! But he says nothing, of course, only walks amid the multitudes with his heart grown silent and turned inward.

Kane eats in a restaurant. The food is so over-spiced as to be tasteless, and he yearns for the simple meals of the farm on which he was raised. Even military manna is better than this! The customers twitter and laugh just like the Archimedes seeds in their heads, as if it is that babbling obscenity that has programmed them instead of the other way around. How these people surrounded themselves with distraction and glare and noise to obscure the emptiness of their souls!

He goes to a place where women dance. It is strange to watch them, because they smile and smile and they are all as beautiful and naked as a dark dream, but they seem to him like damned souls, doomed to act out this empty farce of love and attraction throughout eternity. He cannot get the thought of martyred Nefise Erim out of his head. At last he chooses one of the women—she does not look much like the martyred one, but she is darker than the others—and lets her lead him to her room behind the place where they dance. She feels the hardened tissues beneath his skin and tells him he is very muscular. He empties himself inside her and then, afterward, she asks him why he is crying. He tells her she is mistaken. When she asks again he slaps her. Although he holds back his strength he still knocks her off the bed. The room adds a small surcharge to his bill.

He lets her go back to her work. She is an innocent, of sorts: she has been listening to the godless voices in her head all her life and knows nothing else. No wonder she dances like a damned thing.

Kane is soiled now as he walks the streets again, but his great deed will wipe the taint from him as it always does. He is a Guardian of Covenant, and soon he will be annealed by holy fire.

His masters want the deed done while the crowd is gathered to see the prime minister, and so the question seems simple: before or after? He thinks at first that he will do it when she arrives, as she steps from the car and is hurried into the corridor leading to the great hall. That seems safest. After she has spoken it will be much more difficult, with her security fully deployed and the hall’s own security acting with them. Still, the more he thinks about it the more he feels sure that it must be inside the hall. Only a few thousand would be gathered there to see her speak, but millions more will be watching on the screens surrounding the massive building. If he strikes quickly his deed will be witnessed by this whole world—and other worlds, too.

Surely God wants it that way. Surely He wants the unbeliever destroyed in full view of the public waiting to be instructed.

Kane does not have time or resources to counterfeit permission to be in the building—the politicians and hall security will be checked and rechecked, and will be in place long before Prime Minister Januari arrives. Which means that the only people allowed to enter without going through careful screening will be the prime minister’s own party. That is a possibility, but he will need help with it.

Making contact with local assets is usually a bad sign—it means something has gone wrong with the original plan—but Kane knows that with a task this important he cannot afford to be superstitious. He leaves a signal in the established place. The local assets come to the safehouse after sunset. When he opens the door he finds two men, one young and one old, both disconcertingly ordinary-looking, the kind of men who might come to tow your car or fumigate your flat. The middle-aged one introduces himself as Heinrich Sartorius, his companion just as Carl. Sartorius motions Kane not to speak while Carl sweeps the room with a small object about the size of a toothbrush.

“Clear,” the youth announces. He is bony and homely, but he moves with a certain grace, especially while using his hands.

“Praise the Lord,” Sartorius says. “And blessings on you, brother. What can we do to help you with Christ’s work?”

“Are you really the one from Arjuna?” young Carl asks suddenly.

“Quiet, boy. This is serious.” Sartorius turns back to Kane with an expectant look on his face. “He’s a good lad. It’s just—that meant a lot to the community, what happened there on Arjuna.”

Kane ignores this. He is wary of the Death Angel nonsense. “I need to know what the prime minister’s security detail wears. Details. And I want the layout of the auditorium, with a focus on air and water ducts.”

The older man frowns. “They’ll have that all checked out, won’t they?”

“I’m sure. Can you get it for me without attracting attention?”

“’Course.” Sartorius nods. “Carl’ll find it for you right now. He’s a whiz. Ain’t that right, boy?” The man turns back to Kane. “We’re not backward, you know. The unbelievers always say it’s because we’re backward, but Carl here was up near the top of his class in mathematics. We just kept Jesus in our hearts when the rest of these people gave Him up, that’s the difference.”

“Praise Him,” says Carl, already working the safehouse wall, images flooding past so quickly that even with his augmented vision Kane can barely make out a tenth of them.

“Yes, praise Him,” Sartorius agrees, nodding his head as though there has been a long and occasionally heated discussion about how best to deal with Jesus.

Kane is beginning to feel the ache in his joints again, which usually means he needs more protein. He heads for the small kitchen to fix himself another nutrition drink. “Can I get you two anything?” he asks.

“We’re good,” says the older man. “Just happy doing the Lord’s work.”

They make too much noise, he decides. Not that most people would have heard them, but Kane isn’t most people.

I am the sword of the Lord, he tells himself silently. He can scarcely hear himself think it over the murmur of the Archimedes seed, which although turned down low is still spouting meteorological information, news, tags of philosophy and other trivia like a madman on a street corner. Below the spot where Kane hangs, the three men of the go suited security detail communicate among themselves with hand-signs as they investigate the place where he has entered the building. He has altered the evidence of his incursion to look like someone has tried and failed to get into the auditorium through the intake duct.

The guards seem to draw the desired conclusion: after another flurry of hand-signals, and presumably after relaying the all-clear to the other half of the security squad, who are doubtless inspecting the outside of the same intake duct, the three turn and begin to walk back up the steep conduit, the flow of air making their movements unstable, headlamps splashing unpredictably over the walls. But Kane is waiting above them like a spider, in the shadows of a high place where the massive conduit bends around one of the building’s pillars, his hardened fingertips dug into the concrete, his augmented muscles tensed and locked. He waits until all three pass below him, then drops down silently behind them and crushes the throat of the last man so he can’t alert the others. He then snaps the guard’s neck and tosses the body over his shoulder, then scrambles back up the walls into the place he has prepared, a hammock of canvas much the same color as the inside of the duct. In a matter of seconds he strips the body, praying fervently that the other two will not have noticed that their comrade is missing. He pulls on the man’s go-suit, which is still warm, then leaves the guard’s body in the hammock and springs down to the ground just as the second guard realizes there is no one behind him.

As the man turns toward him Kane sees his lips moving behind the face shield and knows the guard must be talking to him by seed. The imposture is broken, or will be in a moment. Can he pretend his own communications machinery is malfunctioning? Not if these guards are any good. If they work for the prime minister of Archimedes, they probably are. He has a moment before the news is broadcast to all the other security people in the building.

Kane strides forward making nonsensical hand-signs. The other guard’s eyes widen: he does not recognize either the signs or the face behind the polymer shield. Kane shatters the man’s neck with a two-handed strike even as the guard struggles to pull his side arm. Then Kane leaps at the last guard just as he turns.

Except it isn’t a he. It’s a woman and she’s fast. She actually has her gun out of the holster before he kills her.

He has only moments, he knows: the guards will have a regular check-in to their squad leader. He sprints for the side-shaft that should take him to the area above the ceiling of the main hall.

Women as leaders. Women as soldiers. Women dancing naked in public before strangers. Is there anything these Archimedeans will not do to debase the daughters of Eve? Force them all into whoredom, as the Babylonians did?

The massive space above the ceiling is full of riggers and technicians and heavily armed guards. A dozen of those, at least. Most of them are sharpshooters keeping an eye on the crowd through the scopes on their high-powered guns, which is lucky. Some of them might not even see him until he’s on his way down.

Two of the heavily armored troopers turn as he steps out into the open. He is being queried for identification, but even if they think he is one of their own they will not let him get more than a few yards across the floor. He throws his hands in the air and takes a few casual steps toward them, shaking his head and pointing at his helmet. Then he leaps forward, praying they do not understand how quickly he can move.

He covers the twenty yards or so in just a little more than a second. To confound their surprise, he does not attack but dives past the two who have already seen him and the third just turning to find out what the conversation is about. He reaches the edge of the flies and launches himself out into space, tucked and spinning to make himself a more difficult target. Still, he feels a high-speed projectile hit his leg and penetrate a little way, slowed by the guard’s go-suit and stopped by his own hardened flesh.

He lands so hard that the stolen guard helmet pops off his head and bounces away. The first screams and shouts of surprise are beginning to rise from the crowd of parliamentarians, but Kane can hardly hear them. The shock of his fifty-foot fall swirls through the enhanced cartilage of his knees and ankles and wrists, painful but manageable. His heart is beating so fast it almost buzzes, and he is so accelerated that the noise of the audience seemed like the sound of something completely inhuman, the deep scrape of a glacier, the tectonic rumbling of a mountain’s roots. Two more bullets snap into the floor beside him, chips of concrete and fragments of carpet spinning slowly in the air, hovering like ashes in a fiery updraft. The woman at the lectern turns toward him in molasses-time and it is indeed her, Keeta Januari, the Whore of Babylon. As he reaches toward her he can see the individual muscles of her face react—eyebrows pulled up, forehead wrinkling, surprised...but not frightened.

How can that be?

He is already leaping toward her, curving the fingers of each hand into hardened claws for the killing strike. A fraction of a second to cross the space between them as bullets snap by from above and either side, the noise scything past a long instant later, wow, wow, wow. Time hanging, disconnected from history. God’s hand. He is God’s hand, and this is what it must feel like to be in the presence of God Himself, this shimmering, endless, bright NOW...

And then pain explodes through him and sets his nerves on fire and everything goes suddenly and irrevocably black.

Lamentation Kane wakes in a white room, the light from everywhere and nowhere. He is being watched, of course. Soon, the torture will begin.

“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you...” Those were the holy words Spirit whispered to him when he lay badly wounded in the hospital after capturing the last of the Holy Warrior infiltrators, another augmented soldier like himself, a bigger, stronger man who almost killed him before Kane managed to put a stiffened finger through his eyeball into his brain. Spirit recited the words to him again and again during his recuperation: “But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory...when his glory....”

To his horror, he cannot remember the rest of the passage from Peter.

He cannot help thinking of the martyred young woman who gave her life so that he could fail so utterly. He will see her soon. Will he be able to meet her eye? Is there shame in Heaven?

I will be strong, Kane promises her shade, no matter what they do to me.

One of the cell’s walls turns from white to transparent. The room beyond is full of people, most of them in military uniforms or white medical smocks. Only two wear civilian clothing, a pale man and...her. Keeta Januari.

“You may throw yourself against the glass if you want.” Her voice seems to come out of the air on all sides. “It is very, very thick and very, very strong.”

He only stares. He will not make himself a beast, struggling to escape while they laugh. These people are the ones who think themselves related to animals. Animals! Kane knows that the Lord God has given his people dominion.

“Over all the beasts and fowls of the earth,” he says out loud.

“So,” says Prime Minister Januari. “So, this is the Angel of Death.”

“That is not my name.”

“We know your name, Kane. We have been watching you since you reached Archimedes.”

A lie, surely. They would never have let him get so close.

She narrows her eyes. “I would have expected an angel to look more...angelic.”

“I’m no angel, as you almost found out.”

“Ah, if you’re not, then you must be one of the ministers of grace.” She sees the look on his face. “How sad. I forgot that Shakespeare was banned by your mullahs. ‘Angels and ministers of grace defend us!’ From Macbeth. It proceeds a murder.”

“We Christians do not have mullahs,” he says as evenly as he can. He does not care about the rest of the nonsense she speaks. “Those are the people of the Crescent, our brothers of the Book.”

She laughed. “I thought you would be smarter than the rest of your sort, Kane, but you parrot the same nonsense. Do you know that only a few generations back your ‘brothers’ as you call them set off a thermonuclear device, trying to kill your grandparents and the rest of the Christian and Zionist ‘brothers’?”

“In the early days, before the Covenant, there was confusion.” Everyone knew the story. Did she think to shame him with old history, ancient quotations, banned playwrights from the wicked old days of Earth? If so, then both of them had underestimated each other as adversaries.

Of course, at the moment she did hold a somewhat better position.

“So, then, not an angel but a minister. But you don’t pray to be protected from death, but to be able to cause it.”

“I do the Lord’s will.”

“Bullshit, to use a venerable old term. You are a murderer many times over, Kane. You tried to murder me.” But Januari does not look at him as though at an enemy. Nor is there kindness in her gaze, either. She looks at him as though he is a poisonous insect in a jar—an object to be careful with, yes, but mostly a thing to be studied. “What shall we do with you?”

“Kill me. If you have any of the humanity you claim, you will release me and send me to Heaven. But I know you will torture me.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Why would we do that?”

“For information. Our nations are at war, even though the politicians have not yet admitted it to their peoples. You know it, woman. I know it. Everyone in this room knows it.”

Keeta Januari smiles. “You will get no argument from me or anyone here about the state of affairs between Archimedes and the Covenant system. But why would we torture you for information we already have? We are not barbarians. We are not primitives—like some others. We do not force our citizens to worship savage old myths...”

“You force them to be silent! You punish those who would worship the God of their fathers. You have persecuted the People of the Book wherever you have found them!”

“We have kept our planet free from the mania of religious warfare and extremism. We have never interfered in the choices of Covenant.”

“You have tried to keep us from gaining converts.”

The prime minister shakes her head. “Gaining converts? Trying to hijack entire cultures, you mean. Stealing the right of colonies to be free of Earth’s old tribal ghosts. We are the same people that let your predecessors worship the way they wished to—we fought to protect their freedom, and were repaid when they tried to force their beliefs on us at gunpoint.” Her laugh is harsh. “‘Christian tolerance’—two words that do not belong together no matter how often they’ve been coupled. And we all know what your Islamists and Zionists brothers are like. Even if you destroy all of the Archimedean alliance and every single one of us unbelievers, you’ll only find yourself fighting your allies instead. The madness won’t stop until the last living psychopath winds up all alone on a hill of ashes, shouting praise to his god.”

Kane feels his anger rising and closes his mouth. He suffuses his blood with calming chemicals. It confuses him, arguing with her. She is a woman and she should give comfort, but she is speaking only lies—cruel, dangerous lies. This is what happens when the natural order of things is upset. “You are a devil. I will speak to you no more. Do whatever it is you’re going to do.”

“Here’s another bit of Shakespeare,” she says. “If your masters hadn’t banned him, you could have quoted it at me. ‘But man, proud man, dressed in a little brief authority, most ignorant of what he’s most assured’—that’s nicely put, isn’t it? ‘His glassy essence, like an angry ape, plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven as make the angels weep.’” She puts her hands together in a gesture disturbingly reminiscent of prayer. He cannot turn away from her gaze. “So—what are we going to do with you? We could execute you quietly, of course. A polite fiction—died from injuries sustained in the arrest—and no one would make too much fuss.”

The man behind her clears his throat. “Madame Prime Minster, I respectfully suggest we take this conversation elsewhere. The doctors are waiting to see the prisoner...”

“Shut up, Healy.” She turns to look at Kane again, really look, her blue eyes sharp as scalpels. She is older than the Martyrdom Sister by a good twenty years, and despite the dark tint her skin is much paler, but somehow, for a dizzying second, they are the same.

Why do you allow me to become confused, Lord, between the murderer and the martyr?

“Kane comma Lamentation,” she says. “Quite a name. Is that your enemies lamenting, or is it you, crying out helplessly before the power of your God?” She holds up her hand. “Don’t bother to answer. In parts of the Covenant system you’re a hero, you know—a sort of superhero. Were you aware of that? Or have you been traveling too much?”

He does his best to ignore her. He knows he will be lied to, manipulated, that the psychological torments will be more subtle and more important than the physical torture. The only thing he does not understand is: Why her—why the prime minister herself? Surely he isn’t so important. The fact that she stands in front of him at this moment instead of in front of God is, after all, a demonstration that he is a failure.

As if in answer to this thought, a voice murmurs in the back of his skull, “Arjuna’s Angel of Death captured in attempt on PM Januari.” Another inquires, “Have you smelled yourself lately? Even members of parliament can lose freshness—just ask one!” Even here, in the heart of the beast, the voices in his head will not be silenced.

“We need to study you,” the prime minister says at last. “We haven’t caught a Guardian-class agent before—not one of the new ones, like you. We didn’t know if we could do it—the scrambler field was only recently developed.” She smiles again, a quick icy flash like a first glimpse of snow in high mountains. “It wouldn’t have meant anything if you’d succeeded, you know. There are at least a dozen more in my party who can take my place and keep this system safe against you and your masters. But I made good bait—and you leaped into the trap. Now we’re going to find out what makes you such a nasty instrument, little Death Angel.”

He hopes that now the charade is over they will at least shut off the seed in his head. Instead, they leave it in place but disable his controls so that he can’t affect it at all. Children’s voices sing to him about the value of starting each day with a healthy breakfast and he grinds his teeth. The mad chorus yammers and sings to him nonstop. The pagan seed shows him pictures he does not want to see, gives him information about which he does not care, and always, always, it denies that Kane’s God exists.

The Archimedeans claim they have no death penalty. Is this what they do instead? Drive their prisoners to suicide?

If so, he will not do their work for them. He has internal resources they cannot disable without killing him and he was prepared to survive torture of a more obvious sort—why not this? He dilutes the waves of despair that wash through him at night when the lights go out and he is alone with the idiot babble of their idiot planet.

No, Kane will not do their job for him. He will not murder himself. But it gives him an idea.

If he had done it in his cell they might have been more suspicious, but when his heart stops in the course of a rather invasive procedure to learn how the note biotech has grown into his nervous system, they are caught by surprise.

“It must be a failsafe!” one of the doctors cries. Kane hears him as though from a great distance—already his higher systems are shutting down. “Some kind of auto-destruct!”

“Maybe it’s just cardiac arrest...” says another, but it’s only a whisper and he is falling down a long tunnel. He almost thinks he can hear Spirit calling after him...

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

His heart starts pumping again twenty minutes later. The doctors, unaware of the sophistication of his autonomic control, are trying to shock his system back to life. Kane hoped he would be down longer and that they would give him up for dead but that was overly optimistic: instead he has to roll off the table, naked but for trailing wires and tubes, and kill the startled guards before they can draw their weapons. He must also break the neck of one of the doctors who has been trying to save him but now makes the mistake of attacking him. Even after he leaves the rest of the terrified medical staff cowering on the emergency room floor and escapes the surgical wing, he is still in a prison.

“Tired of the same old atmosphere? Holyoake Harbor, the little village under the bubble—we make our own air and it’s guaranteed fresh!”

His internal modifications are healing the surgical damage as quickly as possible but he is staggering, starved of nutrients and burning energy at brushfire speed. God has given him this chance and he must not fail, but if he does not replenish his reserves he will fail.

Kane drops down from an overhead air duct into a hallway and kills a two-man patrol team. He tears the uniform off one of them and then, with stiffened, clawlike fingers, pulls gobbets of meat off the man’s bones and swallows them. The blood is salty and hot. His stomach convulses at what he is doing—the old, terrible sin—but he forces himself to chew and swallow. He has no choice.

Addiction a problem? Not with a NeoBlood transfusion! We also feature the finest life-tested and artificial organs...

He can tell by the sputtering messages on the guards’ communicators that the security personnel are spreading out from the main guardroom. They seem to have an idea of where he has been and where he now is. When he has finished his terrible meal he leaves the residue on the floor of the closet and then makes his way toward the central security office, leaving red footprints behind him. He looks, he feels sure, like a demon from the deepest floors of Hell.

The guards make the mistake of coming out of their hardened room, thinking numbers and weaponry are on their side. Kane takes several bullet wounds but they have nothing as terrible as the scrambling device which captured him in the first place and he moves through his enemies like a whirlwind, snapping out blows of such strength that one guard’s head is knocked from his shoulders and tumbles down the hall.

Once he has waded through the bodies into the main communication room, he throws open as many of the prison cells as he can and turns on the escape and fire alarms, which howl like the damned. He waits until the chaos is ripe, then pulls on a guard’s uniform and heads for the exercise yard. He hurries through the shrieking, bloody confusion of the yard, then climbs over the three sets of razor-wire fencing. Several bullets smack into his hardened flesh, burning like hot rivets. A beam weapon scythes across the last fence with a hiss and pop of snapping wire, but Kane has already dropped to the ground outside.

He can run about fifty miles an hour under most circumstances, but fueled with adrenaline he can go almost half again that fast for short bursts. The only problem is that he is traveling over open, wild ground and has to watch for obstacles—even he can badly injure an ankle at this speed because he cannot armor his joints too much without losing flexibility. Also, he is so exhausted and empty even after consuming the guard’s flesh that black spots caper in front of his eyes: he will not be able to keep up this pace very long.

Here are some wise words from an ancient statesman to consider: “You can do what you have to do, and sometimes you can do it even better than you think you can.”

Kids, all parents can make mistakes. How about yours? Report religious paraphernalia or overly superstitious behavior on your local Freedom Council tip node...

Your body temperature is far above normal. Your stress levels are far above normal. We recommend you see a physician immediately.

Yes, Kane thinks. I believe I’ll do just that.

He finds an empty house within five miles of the prison and breaks in. He eats everything he can find, including several pounds of frozen meat, which helps him compensate for a little of the heat he is generating. He then rummages through the upstairs bedrooms until he finds some new clothes to wear, scrubs off the blood that marks him out, and leaves.

He finds another place some miles away to hide for the night. The residents are home—he even hears them listening to news of his escape, although it is a grossly inaccurate version that concentrates breathlessly on his cannibalism and his terrifying nickname. He lays curled in a box in their attic like a mummy, nearly comatose. When they leave in the morning, so does Kane, reshaping the bones of his face and withdrawing color from his hair. The pagan seed still chirps in his head. Every few minutes it reminds him to keep an eye open for himself, but not to approach himself, because he is undoubtedly very, very dangerous.

“Didn’t know anything about it.” Sartorius looks worriedly up and down the road to make sure they are alone, as if Kane hadn’t already done that better, faster, and more carefully long before the two locals had arrived at the rendezvous. “What can I say? We didn’t have any idea they had that scrambler thing. Of course we would have let you know if we’d heard.”

“I need a doctor—somebody you’d trust with your life, because I’ll be trusting him with mine.

“Cannibal Christian,” says young Carl in an awed voice. “That’s what they’re calling you now.”

“That’s crap.” He is not ashamed because he was doing God’s will, but he does not want to be reminded, either.

“Or the Angel of Death, they still like that one, too. Either way, they’re sure talking about you.”

The doctor is a woman too, a decade or so past her child-bearing years. They wake her up in her small cottage on the edge of a blighted park that looks like it was manufacturing space before a halfway attempt to redeem it. She has alcohol on her breath and her hands shake, but her eyes, although a little bloodshot, are intelligent and alert.

“Don’t bore me with your story and I won’t bore you with mine,” she says when Carl begins to introduce them. A moment later her pupils dilate. “Hang on—I already know yours. You’re the Angel everyone’s talking about.”

“Some people call him the Cannibal Christian,” says young Carl helpfully.

“Are you a believer?” Kane asks her.

“I’m too flawed to be anything else. Who else but Jesus would keep forgiving me?”

She lays him out on a bed sheet on her kitchen table. He waves away both the anesthetic inhaler and the bottle of liquor.

“They won’t work on me unless I let them, and I can’t afford to let them work. I have to stay alert. Now please, cut that godless thing out of my head. Do you have a Spirit you can put in?”

“Beg pardon?” She straightens up, the scalpel already bloody from the incision he is doing his best to ignore.

“What do you call it here? My kind of seed, a seed of Covenant. So I can hear the voice of Spirit again...”

As if to protest its own pending removal, the Archimedes seed abruptly fills his skull with a crackle of interference.

A bad sign, Kane thinks. He must be overworking his internal systems. When he finishes here he’ll need several days rest before he decides what to do next.

“Sorry,” he tells the doctor. “I didn’t hear you. What did you say?”

She shrugs. “I said I’d have to see what I have. One of your people died on this very table a few years ago, I’m sad to say, despite everything I did to save him. I think I kept his communication seed.” She waves her hand a little, as though such things happen or fail to happen every day. “Who knows? I’ll have a look.”

He cannot let himself hope too much. Even if she has it, what are the odds that it will work, and even more unlikely, that it will work here on Archimedes? There are booster stations on all the other colony worlds like Arjuna where the Word is allowed to compete freely with the lies of the Godless.

The latest crackle in his head resolves into a calm, sweetly reasonable voice. ...No less a philosopher than Aristotle himself said, “Men create gods after their own image, not only with regard to their form, but with regard to their mode of life.”

Kane forces himself to open his eyes. The room is blurry, the doctor a faint shadowy shape bending over him. Something sharp probes in his neck.

“There it is,” she says. “It’s going to hurt a bit coming out. What’s your name? Your real name?”

“Lamentation.”

“Ah.” She doesn’t smile, at least he doesn’t think she does—it’s hard for him to make out her features—but she sounds amused. “‘She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies.’ That’s Jerusalem they’re talking about,” the doctor adds. “The original one.”

“Book of Lamentations,” he says quietly. The pain is so fierce that it’s all he can do not to reach up and grab the hand that holds the probing, insupportable instrument. At times like this, when he most needs to restrain himself, he can most clearly feel his strength. If he were to lose control and loose that unfettered power, he feels that he could blaze like one of the stellar torches in heaven’s great vault, that he could destroy an entire world.

“Hey,” says a voice in the darkness beyond the pool of light on the kitchen table—young Carl. “Hey. Something’s going on.”

“What are you talking about?” demands Sartorius. A moment later the window explodes in a shower of sparkling glass and the room fills with smoke.

Not smoke, gas. Kane springs off the table, accidentally knocking the doctor back against the wall. He gulps in enough breath to last him a quarter of an hour and flares the tissues of his pharynx to seal his air passages. If it’s a nerve gas there is nothing much he can do, though—too much skin exposed.

In the corner the doctor struggles to her feet, emerging from the billows on the floor with her mouth wide and working but nothing coming out. It isn’t just her. Carl and Sartorius are holding their breath as they shove furniture against the door as a makeshift barricade. The bigger, older man already has a gun in his hand. Why is it so quiet outside? What are they doing out there?

The answer comes with a stuttering roar. Small arms fire suddenly fills the kitchen wall with holes. The doctor throws up her hands and begins a terrible jig, as though she is being stitched by an invisible sewing machine. When she falls to the ground it is in pieces.

Young Carl stretches motionless on the floor in a pool of his own spreading blood and brains. Sartorius is still standing unsteadily, but red bubbles through his clothing in several places.

Kane is on the ground—he has dropped without realizing it. He does not stop to consider near-certainty of failure, but instead springs to the ceiling and digs his fingers in long enough to smash his way through with the other hand, then hunkers in the crawlspace until the first team of troopers come in to check the damage, flashlights darting through the fog of gas fumes. How did they find him so quickly? More importantly, what have they brought to use against him?

Speed is his best weapon. He climbs out through the vent. He has to widen it, and the splintering brings a fusillade from below. When he reaches the roof dozens of shots crack past him and two actually hit him, one in the arm and one in the back, these from the parked security vehicles where the rest of the invasion team are waiting for the first wave to signal them inside. The shock waves travel through him so that he shakes like a wet dog. A moment later, as he suspected, they deploy the scrambler. This time, though, he is ready: he saturates his neurons with calcium to deaden the electromagnetic surge, and although his own brain activity ceases for a moment and he drops bonelessly across the roofcrest, there is no damage. A few seconds later he is up again. Their best weapon spent, the soldiers have three seconds to shoot at a dark figure scrambling with incredible speed along the roofline, then Lamentation Kane jumps down into the hot tracery of their fire, sprints forward and leaps off the hood of their own vehicle and over them before they can change firing positions.

He can’t make it to full speed this time—not enough rest and not enough refueling—but he can go fast enough that he has vanished into the Hellas city sewers by time the strike team can re-mobilize.

The Archimedes seed, which has been telling his enemies exactly where he is, lies behind him now, wrapped in bloody gauze somewhere in the ruins of the doctor’s kitchen. Keeta Januari and her Rationalists will learn much about the ability of the Covenant scientists to manufacture imitations of Archimedes technology, but they will not learn anything more about Kane. Not from the seed. He is free of it now.

He emerges almost a full day later from a pumping station on the outskirts of one of Hellas City’s suburbs, but now he is a different Kane entirely, a Kane never before seen. Although the doctor removed the Archimedes seed, she had no time to locate, let alone implant, a Spirit device in its place: for the first time in as long as he can remember his thoughts are entirely his own, his head empty of any other voices.

The solitude is terrifying.

He makes his way up into the hills west of the great city, hiding in the daytime, moving cautiously by night because so many of the rural residents have elaborate security systems or animals who can smell Kane even before he can smell them. At last he finds an untended property. He could break in easily, but instead extrudes one of his fingernails and hardens it to pick the lock. He wants to minimize his presence whenever possible—he needs time to think, to plan. The ceiling has been lifted off his world and he is confused.

For safety’s sake, he spends the first two days exploring his new hiding place only at night, with the lights out and his pupils dilated so far that even the sudden appearance of a white piece of paper in front of him is painful. From what he can tell, the small, modern house belongs to a man traveling for a month on the eastern side of the continent. The owner has been gone only a week, which gives Kane ample time to rest and think about what he is going to do next.

The first thing he has to get used to is the silence in his head. All his life since he was a tiny, unknowing child, Spirit has spoken to him. Now he cannot hear her calm, inspiring voice. The godless prattle of Archimedes is silenced, too. There is nothing and no one to share Kane’s thoughts.

He cries that first night as he cried in the whore’s room, like a lost child. He is a ghost. He is no longer human. He has lost his inner guide, he has botched his mission, he has failed his God and his people. He has eaten the flesh of his own kind, and for nothing.

Lamentation Kane is alone with his great sin.

He moves on before the owner of the house returns. He knows he could kill the man and stay for many more months, but it seems time to do things differently, although Kane can’t say precisely why. He can’t even say for certain what things he is going to do. He still owes God the death of Prime Minister Januari, but something seems to have changed inside him and he is in no hurry to fulfill that promise. The silence in his head, at first so frightening, has begun to seem something more. Holy, perhaps, but certainly different than anything he has experienced before, as though every moment is a waking dream.

No, it is more like waking up from a dream. But what kind of dream has he escaped, a good one or a bad one? And what will replace it?

Even without Spirit’s prompting, he remembers Christ’s words: You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. In his new inner silence, the ancient promise seems to have many meanings. Does Kane really want the truth? Could he stand to be truly free?

Before he leaves the house he takes the owner’s second-best camping equipment, the things the man left behind. Kane will live in the wild areas in the highest parts of the hills for as long as seems right. He will think. It is possible that he will leave Lamentation Kane there behind him when he comes out again. He may leave the Angel of Death behind as well.

What will remain? And who will such a new sort of creature serve? The angels, the devils...or just itself?

Kane will be interested to find out.