

FREE CHAPTER SAMPLE



The Unowned Sky

Book One of The Demiurge War

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Chapter One: The First Witness

An excerpt from the Reader's Edition.
The complete book is available separately on Payhip.

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Chapter One

The First Witness

Zandither Borealis had spent most of his life feeling as though the world had been built slightly wrong.

Not broken in any obvious way. Not enough for others to notice. The sun rose. The clocks moved. People went to work, paid debts, carried groceries, buried parents, married strangers, named children after ancestors, and pretended the ache inside them was adulthood. The world functioned. That was what made the wrongness so difficult to explain.

A machine could function and still be evil.

A cage could be clean.

A lie could be beautiful enough to be mistaken for heaven.

Zandither had known this since childhood, though he had never possessed the language for it. As a boy, he used to lie in the grass behind his mother's house and stare at the sky until his eyes watered. Other children saw clouds. Birds. Airplanes. Blue distance.

Zandither saw pressure.

He did not know what else to call it. The sky felt too close, as though some invisible hand had stretched a painted veil over the world and fastened it to the horizon. Sometimes, if he stared long enough, he could sense patterns moving behind the blue — geometry beneath daylight, a faint trembling in the atmosphere, like heat rising off asphalt even in winter.

When he told adults, they smiled with the careful patience reserved for children, fools, and the grieving.

"You have a big imagination," they said.

So he learned to stop speaking.

But he did not stop seeing.

By the time Zandither became a man, silence had become one of his survival skills. He carried it with him through classrooms where teachers explained reality as though the most important things had already been settled, through churches where men in clean suits spoke of God while fear moved behind their eyes, through jobs where tired people sold pieces of their lives by the hour and called the transaction responsibility.

He learned the proper motions.

Nod. Smile. Work. Eat. Sleep. Pay. Endure.

But beneath every ordinary day, something watched him.

Not constantly. That would have driven him mad. It came in flashes: the feeling of being examined by an intelligence just outside the range of thought; the sudden certainty that a stranger on the street had recognized him and then immediately forgotten why; the way electronic screens sometimes flickered when he walked near them; the dreams that returned every few months with the same impossible symbols.

A circle split by a vertical line.

An eye above it.

A door beneath it.

Stars falling upward.

He had drawn it once when he was seven years old. His mother found the paper under his bed and asked him what it meant.

“I don’t know,” he had said.

That was not entirely true.

Even then, he knew it was a warning.

Now, at thirty-four, Zandither woke from the dream again.

He sat upright in bed, gasping as though he had been dragged from deep water. The room around him was dark except for the gray hint of dawn pressing against the curtains. His heart struck hard against his ribs. Sweat cooled along his neck. His hands trembled.

For several seconds, he could not remember where he was.

Then the world returned by pieces.

The apartment.

The crooked bookshelf.

The desk buried beneath notebooks.

The cracked mug beside the lamp.

The old floorboards.

The faint hum of the refrigerator from the kitchen.

The city beyond the window, still half-asleep.

Zandither pressed both palms against his face.

The dream had been stronger this time.

He had not merely seen the glass sky crack.

He had touched it.

And something behind it had touched back.

He lowered his hands slowly. His eyes moved toward the window.

The curtains were still closed.

Yet the room glowed faintly blue.

Not with daylight.

With symbols.

They shimmered across the walls in thin lines of pale fire: spirals, triangles, branching equations, letters from no alphabet he knew and yet almost understood. They moved like living mathematics, arranging and rearranging themselves over the plaster. For one breathless moment, Zandither saw his entire room transformed into the inside of some cosmic engine.

Then the refrigerator clicked.

The symbols vanished.

Darkness returned.

Zandither did not move.

A laugh rose in his throat, short and terrified. He swallowed it down.

“No,” he whispered.

The word sounded weak in the room.

He got out of bed and crossed to the desk. His notebook lay open where he had left it the night before, a page filled with half-finished thoughts and the kind of questions he never shared with anyone.

What if consciousness is not produced by the brain, but received through it?

What if observation collapses more than probability?

What if the universe responds differently when it knows it is being witnessed?

Why do sacred symbols resemble particle diagrams?

Why do I keep dreaming of Antarctica?

He stared at the last line.

He did not remember writing it.

Beneath it, in darker ink, someone had drawn the symbol.

Circle. Line. Eye. Door. Falling stars.

Zandither stepped back from the desk.

His first thought was that someone had been inside his apartment. But the door was locked. The windows were closed. Nothing had been moved.

Except the notebook.

He looked at the pen beside it.

The same black pen he always used.

He reached down, touched the page, and felt a pulse move through the paper.

Not a metaphor.

A pulse.

Like the notebook had a heart.

The lights in the apartment flickered once.

Zandither pulled his hand away.

Across the room, his phone vibrated on the nightstand.

The sound made him flinch.

He stared at it as it buzzed again. Then again. Then again. Not a call. A notification. Several of them. Too many, arriving too quickly, one after another in a mechanical panic.

He picked up the phone.

No sender.

No app.

Just a line of text repeated across the screen:

DO NOT TRUST THE SKY.

The message multiplied until it filled the display.

Then the screen went black.

Zandither stood frozen, holding the dead phone in his hand.

Outside, something screamed.

He rushed to the window and pulled the curtain aside.

The city below looked ordinary. Dawn spread slowly between buildings. A garbage truck groaned along the curb. A man in a red hoodie walked a small dog past a row of parked cars. Steam rose from a vent in the street. Somewhere, far off, a siren wailed and faded.

Nothing was screaming now.

Zandither looked upward.

The sky was pale and clean.

For one second, relief almost came.

Then he saw the crack.

It hung above the city like a flaw in glass, so thin he might have mistaken it for a contrail if it had not been perfectly vertical. It stretched from one cloud bank to another, trembling faintly, black at the center and silver at the edges.

No one else looked up.

The man in the red hoodie kept walking his dog. The garbage truck kept moving. A woman in business clothes stepped from her building, balancing coffee in one hand and a phone in the other. Traffic lights changed. Engines started. Windows brightened.

The world continued.

Zandither pressed his hand against the cold glass.

A matching crack spread through his reflection.

Not through the window.

Through the reflected image of the sky behind him.

His breath stopped.

Then the crack above the city vanished.

The phone in his hand came back to life.

One final message appeared.

THE FIRST WITNESS HAS AWAKENED.

The device shut off again.

Zandither did not go to work that morning.

He tried.

Habit was a powerful spell. Stronger, in some lives, than reason. He showered. Dressed. Made coffee he did not drink. Put on his boots. Checked the locks twice. Took his coat from the chair. All the while, the words repeated inside him.

The First Witness has awakened.

It was absurd. Grandiose. The kind of sentence that belonged in a cult pamphlet or a fever dream.

Yet it carried the terrible weight of recognition.

Not announcement.

Memory.

By eight o'clock, Zandither stood outside his apartment building with the rest of the city moving around him. The morning air was cold enough to sting. Cars hissed over wet pavement. Buses exhaled at curbs. People moved in hurried lines, faces lit by phones, eyes lowered as though trained from birth to avoid heaven.

Zandither watched them and felt a grief so sudden and vast that he almost staggered.

They were tired.

All of them.

Even the ones pretending not to be. Even the ones with expensive coats and polished shoes. Even the ones laughing into earbuds. Beneath their faces, beneath personality and class and ambition and routine, Zandither sensed something wounded moving through them.

A pressure.

The same pressure he had always felt in the sky.

Only now it was inside people.

Threads of pale light extended from their bodies upward into nothing. Not visible exactly, not in the way a streetlamp was visible, but present in the hidden layer behind sight. The threads trembled with every emotion: anxiety, shame, hunger, envy, desire, despair. They rose from skulls, hearts, spines, and mouths, disappearing into the morning air.

Zandither turned slowly.

Everyone had them.

A child in a yellow backpack.

A construction worker drinking coffee from a paper cup.

An old woman feeding crumbs to pigeons.

A police officer leaning against his cruiser.

A young couple arguing quietly near the crosswalk.

Threads.

Harvest lines.

The thought came from somewhere deeper than language.

Zandither squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them, the threads were gone.

But he had seen enough.

He stepped away from the building and walked without choosing a direction.

The city had always felt hostile to him, but not because of crime or noise or the usual complaints. Its hostility was spiritual. Its buildings rose like monuments to exhausted obedience. Banks with marble faces. Churches converted into luxury apartments. Hospitals glowing with sterile light. Towers of glass where human beings sat in rows beneath artificial suns, feeding invisible systems with attention and time.

Every advertisement seemed different now.

Not because the images had changed, but because Zandither could see the hunger beneath them. The smiling faces on billboards were not selling products. They were selling lack. The promise that you were incomplete. The command to desire. The quiet humiliation of never being enough.

A woman's face twenty feet tall looked down from the side of a building, flawless and empty-eyed.

Beneath her perfume ad, someone had spray-painted a symbol in black.

Circle. Line. Eye. Door.

Zandither stopped.

People flowed around him, irritated by his stillness.

He stared at the symbol until the paint seemed to move.

A voice spoke beside him.

"You can see it now."

Zandither turned.

An old man sat on the sidewalk with his back against the building. He wore three coats layered over each other and fingerless gloves despite the cold. His beard was white, his skin dark and weathered, his eyes bright with an intelligence that did not match the broken cardboard sign beside him.

The sign read:

THEY TAX YOUR MONEY, BUT THEY HARVEST YOUR FEAR.

Zandither stared at him.

The old man smiled without warmth.

“You’re late,” he said.

“I don’t know you.”

“No,” the man said. “But something in you knows something in me.”

Zandither looked around. No one paid attention to them. That frightened him more than if everyone had. The crowd seemed to bend around the old man without seeing him, like water moving around a stone.

“Who are you?” Zandither asked.

The old man reached into his coat and removed a small object wrapped in red cloth.

Zandither took a step back.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” the man said. “If I were, you wouldn’t have woken up.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“It isn’t meant to be.”

The old man held out the wrapped object.

Zandither did not take it.

“What is that?”

“A key.”

“To what?”

The old man’s eyes lifted toward the sky.

“To the part of the prison that still remembers it was once a gate.”

A cold current moved through Zandither.

“I’m leaving.”

“You already did,” the old man said.

Zandither frowned.

The old man tapped his own temple. “The moment you saw the lattice, you left the world they built for you. Your body is still walking through it, yes. Your bills still exist. Your name still exists. Your history still exists. But the spell of ownership has cracked. That cannot be repaired.”

Zandither swallowed.

“You saw it too?”

“I saw enough to lose everything,” the old man said. “And enough to know the loss was mercy.”

The traffic light changed. A truck roared past. For an instant, the sound of its engine stretched and deepened until it became something like chanting. Zandither heard syllables hidden in the machinery.

Obey. Divide. Consume. Forget.

He pressed his hands over his ears.

The old man watched him carefully.

“It gets louder before it gets clearer.”

“What is happening to me?”

“What was always happening,” the man said. “Only now you are conscious during the procedure.”

Zandither looked at him.

The old man’s expression softened.

“That is the cruelty of awakening. People imagine truth arrives like sunlight. It does not. Truth arrives first as nausea. Then grief. Then rage. Then discipline. Only after that does it become light.”

Zandither wanted to deny everything. He wanted the man to be insane. He wanted himself to be insane. Madness, at least, would leave the world intact.

But deep within him, something had begun arranging itself around the old man’s words.

“What do you want from me?” Zandither asked.

The old man held out the red cloth again.

“What we have always wanted from the first of the three.”

Zandither did not move.

“The three what?”

“The Witnesses.”

The word struck him with physical force.

Images flashed through his mind.

A woman standing in a chamber of violet flame, her hands covered in blood that turned to starlight.

A man kneeling in a field beneath a black sun, surrounded by the dead, listening to their names.

Himself before a rift in the sky, screaming not in fear but command.

Zandither stumbled backward.

The old man rose faster than his age should have allowed. He caught Zandither by the wrist.

The moment their skin touched, the city disappeared.

Zandither stood beneath ice.

A continent of white silence stretched in every direction. Wind screamed across a dead horizon. Beneath his feet, miles below the frozen crust of Antarctica, something enormous pulsed with blue-black light.

A pyramid.

Not stone.

Not metal.

Something older than both.

Its sides were smooth and dark, absorbing light rather than reflecting it. Around it, buried under impossible pressure and time, machines circled like sleeping gods. Rings within rings. Towers carved with sigils. Vast cables grown like roots into the bones of the Earth.

At the pyramid's apex, a symbol burned.

Circle. Line. Eye. Door.

Then the vision shifted.

He stood beneath Prague.

A chamber of black brick and gold mathematics. Astronomical clocks turned backward along the walls. Human bones were arranged into equations. A well at the center opened not downward, but inward, into a depth filled with moving stars.

A woman's voice whispered:

Find the equation beneath the saint's shadow.

The vision shifted again.

Now he stood in a void where no stars burned.

Before him towered beings made of law and hunger. Their bodies were beautiful in the way weapons could be beautiful: precise, cold, and without mercy. Their faces changed every second — king, priest, judge, parent, lover, executioner, angel — each mask dissolving into another.

Behind them moved something greater.

Blind and radiant.

A creator that hated creation for being free.

The Demiurge.

Zandither fell to his knees.

The thing turned toward him.

Not fully.

Only enough.

Its attention was unbearable. Zandither felt his memories open like books. Childhood fears. Secret shame. Regrets. Desires. Every wound he had hidden from others and every wound he had hidden from himself. The intelligence behind the Archons touched them all with surgical tenderness.

Then it spoke inside him.

You are tired.

Zandither could not breathe.

Lay down your burden. Freedom has wounded you. Choice has exhausted you. Let the design hold you. Let the sky close. Let the world remain mercifully small.

For one moment, Zandither wanted to obey.

That was the horror.

Not that the Demiurge was monstrous.

That some wounded part of him found comfort in the cage.

Then another voice rose beneath it.

Older.

Human.

Fierce.

The sky was never theirs.

Zandither opened his eyes.

He was back on the sidewalk, gasping, the old man still holding his wrist.

Only a second had passed.

The crowd continued around them.

The old man released him.

“You saw too much,” he said quietly. “But there is no gentle amount anymore.”

Zandither bent forward, hands on his knees, fighting not to vomit.

“What was that?”

“The shape of the war.”

“I don’t want this.”

“No true Witness does.”

“Then choose someone else.”

The old man gave a sad smile.

“That is what every worthy one says.”

Zandither straightened slowly. “I’m not worthy.”

“Good. Worthiness is a word tyrants invented to make obedience sound holy. You are not chosen because you are pure. You are not chosen because you are better. You are chosen because you can see, and because somewhere inside you, despite everything this world has done, you have not surrendered your consent.”

The words sank into Zandither with frightening precision.

Consent.

That was what had always felt wrong.

The world had demanded agreement from him before it ever explained the contract.

The old man placed the red-wrapped object in Zandither's hand. This time, Zandither accepted it.

It was heavier than it looked.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Open it when you are alone."

"Why?"

"Because the first key does not unlock a door." The old man looked past him, down the street. "It unlocks the witness."

Zandither followed his gaze.

At the far end of the block stood three figures in gray coats.

They were too still.

The crowd moved around them, but the figures did not shift, did not blink, did not breathe visibly in the cold. Their faces were ordinary at first glance. A middle-aged woman. A young man. An elderly gentleman with silver hair.

Then Zandither saw their eyes.

Not glowing.

Worse.

Empty of reflection.

"They found you faster than expected," the old man said.

Zandither's pulse surged.

"Who are they?"

"Not who. What."

The three figures began walking toward them.

Every person they passed seemed to forget something. A woman stopped mid-sentence, confused. A cyclist slowed and stared at his hands. A child began crying without knowing why. The air dimmed around the gray-coated figures, as if the morning itself wanted distance from them.

The old man gripped Zandither's shoulder.

"Listen carefully. Go to Saint Orison's Church on Bellweather Street. It has been abandoned for twenty years. Beneath the altar is a stairwell. At the bottom, knock once, then speak the words: *I return what was hidden from the false maker.*"

Zandither stared at him. “What?”

“Repeat it.”

“I return what was hidden from the false maker.”

“Good.”

The figures were closer now.

The old man’s body changed.

Not visibly at first. But something around him straightened. The air recognized him. The broken sidewalk beneath his feet began to tremble. Symbols appeared across his gloves in lines of blue fire.

“You need to run,” he said.

“I don’t even know your name.”

The old man looked at him.

For the first time, fear passed through his eyes.

“Names are hooks. But before I gave mine away, I was called Malachi.”

The nearest gray-coated figure opened its mouth.

No human sound emerged.

Instead, Zandither heard a choir of commands layered over one another.

HALT THE DEVIATION. RESTORE THE VEIL. ISOLATE THE WITNESS. CORRECT THE BLOODLINE.

Malachi stepped between Zandither and the figures.

The air around him ignited with geometry.

“Run,” he said.

This time Zandither obeyed.

He turned and pushed into the crowd, clutching the red-wrapped key against his chest. Behind him, the street erupted in silence.

Not sound.

Silence.

A violent absence that swallowed engines, voices, footsteps, wind. Zandither looked back once and saw Malachi standing in the center of a widening circle of stillness, his hands raised, blue fire burning from his palms into the shape of an enormous sigil.

The gray-coated figures had stopped.

Their human masks were peeling.

Beneath the false skin, something pale and angular pressed outward. Not flesh. Not bone. A geometry pretending to be alive.

Malachi shouted a word Zandither did not understand.

The windows along the block cracked in unison.

Sound returned all at once.

People screamed.

Car alarms shrieked.

The sky above the street flickered, revealing for less than a heartbeat the golden-black lattice stretched over the world.

Then Zandither ran harder.

He did not know where Bellweather Street was.

He did not know where Saint Orison's Church was.

He did not know why an old man who may or may not have been homeless had just fought things that may or may not have been human in the middle of the city.

He knew only that the world had finally stopped pretending.

And that somewhere beneath its concrete, wires, churches, and lies, an ancient Order had been waiting for him.

The red cloth in his hand grew warm.

Zandither ducked into an alley and pressed his back against the brick wall, breathing hard. The alley smelled of rainwater, rust, and old trash. Above him, fire escapes climbed like skeletal ladders toward a strip of pale sky.

His fingers shook as he unwrapped the object.

Inside was a small black disk about the size of a coin.

It was not metal, though it reflected nothing. Its surface seemed deeper than its thickness, as if he were holding a hole cut from midnight. Around its edge ran tiny symbols, each one too small to read until he focused on it. Then each symbol expanded inside his mind.

A spiral inside an eye.

A triangle pierced by a star.

An ouroboros devouring a chain.

A black sun divided by thirteen rays.

At the center of the disk was the same mark from his dreams.

Circle. Line. Eye. Door.

The disk pulsed once.

Zandither felt something open behind his heart.

Not emotionally.

Architecturally.

A hidden chamber within him unlocked.

Memories that were not his own flooded through.

Men and women in robes standing beneath desert stars. Children hiding books under floorboards while soldiers pounded on doors. A woman burning at a stake, smiling because the flames could not reach what she had hidden in the song she sang. A scientist staring at impossible collision data and whispering a prayer he did not believe in. Monks carving forbidden diagrams beneath a monastery while the church above them rang bells for their executioners.

And always the Order.

Preserving.

Waiting.

Bleeding knowledge forward through time.

Then came the final memory.

A phrase.

Not spoken.

Installed.

The Interdimensional Omni-Galactical Order of the Divination of G.O.D. does not recruit. It remembers its own.

Zandither collapsed to one knee.

Tears filled his eyes before he understood why.

All his life, he had believed his loneliness was proof that something was wrong with him.

Now he understood.

Some part of him had been listening for a call the world had been designed to drown out.

At the mouth of the alley, a shadow moved.

Zandither looked up.

One of the gray-coated figures stood there.

The elderly gentleman.

His human face remained, but it no longer fit correctly. The mouth smiled with borrowed muscles. The eyes reflected nothing. Around him, the brick walls seemed to lean away.

“Zandither Borealis,” it said.

His name sounded obscene in its mouth.

Zandither rose slowly.

The disk burned in his palm.

“You are experiencing a neurological event,” the figure said gently. “You are frightened. You are unstable. Come with us and we will restore continuity.”

Zandither backed away.

The figure stepped into the alley.

“Malachi is a dissociative projection. The symbols are stress artifacts. The messages are pattern hallucinations. Your mind has created a myth to explain suffering.”

Its voice was calm. Compassionate.

Perfect.

That perfection chilled Zandither more than anger would have.

“You’re lying,” he said.

The figure tilted its head.

“Truth is the name humans give to whichever illusion reduces pain.”

The disk pulsed again.

Zandither felt heat move up his arm.

The figure noticed.

Its smile vanished.

“Relinquish the object.”

Zandither closed his fist around it.

The alley darkened.

The figure's body unfolded.

Not physically. Reality simply gave up trying to contain the disguise. The gray coat stretched into impossible angles. The human face split into layered masks, each one speaking a different command. Behind them burned a column of pale light filled with rotating rings and lidless eyes.

Zandither's terror became so large that it passed beyond panic into clarity.

He understood then that fear was not merely emotion.

It was currency.

And this thing had come to collect.

The Archon extended one hand.

The air between them compressed.

Zandither felt invisible hooks enter his mind.

Memories rose unwillingly: failures, humiliations, griefs, every moment he had believed himself powerless. The Archon pulled on them, weaving them into a cage.

YOU ARE ALONE.

The words formed inside his skull.

YOU ARE INSIGNIFICANT.

Zandither staggered.

YOU ARE NOT THE FIRST TO RESIST.

The alley walls bent inward.

YOU ARE ONLY THE NEXT TO BREAK.

Something in Zandither almost did.

Then, beneath the pressure, he felt the hidden chamber behind his heart open wider.

The disk was no longer hot.

It was alive with him.

Zandither did not know a spell.

He did not know a ritual.

He did not know the laws of the war he had entered.

But he knew one thing with absolute certainty.

He did not consent.

He looked at the Archon and spoke, not loudly, but with the full weight of his being.

“No.”

The word struck the alley like thunder.

The hooks in his mind snapped.

The Archon recoiled.

For one impossible second, Zandither saw the creature not as a god, not as a demon, not as an agent of cosmic law, but as what it truly was beneath all its masks:

A parasite terrified of a soul it could not manufacture.

The disk in Zandither’s hand flared with black-gold light.

The symbol at its center opened like an eye.

The Archon screamed.

This time the sound was real.

Every window above the alley shattered outward. Birds exploded from rooftops. A transformer burst somewhere down the block, showering sparks into the street. The Archon stumbled backward, its masks flickering.

Zandither ran.

He burst from the other end of the alley into a narrow side street and kept moving. He did not stop when people shouted. He did not stop when his lungs burned. He did not stop when the sky above him rippled like disturbed water.

Only when the abandoned steeple of Saint Orison’s appeared between two buildings did he slow.

The church stood at the edge of a forgotten block where the city seemed to have withdrawn from itself. Its stained-glass windows were boarded. Its stone steps were cracked. Vines climbed the walls like veins. A rusted chain hung loose across the front doors, already broken.

Above the entrance, carved into weather-darkened stone, was a saint with both hands raised toward heaven.

But the saint’s face had been removed.

In its place, someone had carved the symbol.

Circle. Line. Eye. Door.

Zandither climbed the steps.

The moment his hand touched the door, every bell in the dead church began to ring.

Not above him.

Below.

Deep beneath the earth, bells answered from a place no church should have possessed.

The doors opened inward.

Darkness waited.

Zandither looked back once at the city.

People continued moving through their morning. Sirens wailed in the distance. Smoke rose from somewhere beyond the roofs. The sky was blue again, flawless and false.

He thought of the threads rising from strangers.

He thought of Malachi standing in blue fire.

He thought of the Demiurge whispering comfort through a cage.

Then he stepped inside.

The doors closed behind him.

For a moment, there was only darkness.

Then thirteen blue candles lit themselves along the aisle.

At the far end of the ruined sanctuary, beneath a broken altar, stone stairs descended into the earth.

Zandither walked forward.

Each step echoed like a verdict.

At the altar, he knelt and found the iron ring hidden beneath the dust exactly where Malachi had said it would be. He pulled. A slab of stone shifted aside, releasing a breath of cold air from below.

The stairwell opened.

Zandither descended.

At the bottom was a black door without handle or hinge.

In its center was carved an eye within a spiral.

Zandither raised his hand.

Knocked once.

The sound traveled farther than it should have, down corridors beneath the world, through chambers beneath history, into the listening bones of an Order older than nations.

Then Zandither spoke the words.

“I return what was hidden from the false maker.”

For a long moment, nothing happened.

Then a voice answered from the other side.

“Then enter, First Witness.”

The door opened.

And beneath the dead church, beneath the city, beneath the visible world of men, the forbidden light of the Order shone upon him.

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