

# IT FEEDS

ZAK LETTERCAST



Copyright © 2022 by Zak Lettercast

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

# JB LETTERCAST

Zak Lettercast is an emerging speculative fiction author. He has a passion for dark, gritty, speculative fiction. As a chronically ill transgender man with a unique background, he strives to craft relatable, diverse characters. Lettercast takes pride in his ability to build unique, inspiring worlds and create thought-provoking plots.

More Lettercast tales:

*400-Year Frost (Despite the Cold Anthology)*

*Violet Winter (Falling into a Winter Sky Anthology)*

*Ocher Spring (Falling into a Spring Sky Anthology)*

*She's Not Here: Ten Years of Transgender Poetry*

Coming Soon by Lettercast:

*Arachnapocalypse! The Anthology*

*The Castle*

*Revolution Ascending*

*Where Love Shines On*





## CHAPTER ONE

“Today is a momentous day,” the Magister Prime began. It was a speech he gave every cycle to hundreds upon hundreds of graduates at the Clerk United College of the Arts. “Soon, your scholasticism will be put to the ultimate test. Your grit will be fortified or shattered every day after you leave these hallowed halls.” He paused for effect, then thrust his hand out in blessing over the seated crowd. “May the Celestial Truth and Her Bearer, Vyharæ the Holy, have mercy on your souls! Remember, my children; there is nothing to fear, so long as you follow the doctrine laid out before you. Now, a word from your valedictorian.”

Slow harp music began, and the graduates rose from their seats in reverence for their most accomplished classmate. Some had tears in their eyes as Chordisius, the class valedictorian, took her place at the podium. A fresh-healed scar decorated her face like gold on broken pottery. Her body rippled as she adjusted the mic and glanced across the sea of faces before her. The music subsided, and she glanced down at her hands, gathering herself for what was

likely to be the only speech she would ever make in her life. Clerks rarely speak outside their main career functions, so the world listens when they have something important to say.

“There were three thousand six hundred and twenty-two of us at the start of this training program.”

A mournful wail flew up to the vaulted cathedral ceiling from somewhere in the back of the crowd.

Chordisius nodded her head in understanding. “Yes. I miss them too. Three thousand six hundred and twenty-two whittled painfully down to just under one thousand. I see before me fewer than one thousand Clerks, all of you heroes, survivors. We carry the names of those who passed as we ride into battle tomorrow. We endured this journey together, and now it’s time to start a new one, in which even more names will be added to our breastplates. I would say tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your new, exciting life... But Clerks are honest!”

There was a warm chuckle from the crowd.

“We all know that this is the first day of the real struggle. We made it this far, but we have so much further to go. And I...” she took a shaky breath, “I will lead you there if you can keep up. If you can push through the pain and the torment, I will lead you to the trials beyond our sheltered halls. But you have to want it!”

There was a loud cheer that made the stained glass windows rumble.

“You have to want this job, or it will eat you alive.” She paused, letting out a half-hearted chuckle. “We all nearly died during finals week. Those sleepless nights, the stress... it nearly killed us. But tomorrow? Tomorrow will be the true final test of our worthiness as Clerks. If you can survive tomorrow, you can survive the day after that and the day

after that. And then it's just a matter of who makes it up that ladder first. After we cross the threshold, we're enemies, you and I. Comrades, and competitors in an ever-changing landscape that will be our home for the coming years. I, Chordisius, class valedictorian of cycle 244 at the Clerk United College of the Arts, am rooting for you. Thank you."

The hall erupted into applause as she stepped down and took her place in the front row. The music began again, and names were called for graduates to step to the stage and grab their diplomas and Clerk-Kits. Each Magister had something to hand the graduates, something useful for the coming trials every Clerk was bound to face in the line of duty. The queue of handshakes and gifts ended with the Magister Prime, who bestowed a blessing from the beloved Holy Bearer and a piece of paper with a personalized inscription from the Celestial Truth, Herself.

Each clerk took the footpath through the atrium to their bunkhouse to gather their sparse belongings. It was the same path the very first Clerk, Grambrit the Brave, had taken after gaining The Knowledge in the Garden of Beatha. Until Grambrit the Brave earned his namesake, it was said that there was no hope among the expansive population aboard the *Vorena*. Life before Clerks was riddled with fear and turmoil.

Llewis thought about this as he silently trod the blessed path back to the university housing sector. The atrium itself was dark, but he glowed wanly in the unique light that can only come from outer space. He felt like a spirit without a body. He was hovering as he went. There was glee. He had graduated from the most challenging program in all the colleges of *Vorena*! There was terror. Tomorrow he would be free of the rigid structure of the Clerk United College of the

Arts. Tomorrow, he would be thrust into the thick of the chaos below decks.

The barracks were alight with celebration. Throbbing music shook the narrow corridor, and graduates danced in their doorways. It's been accurately said that Clerks know how to party. Llewys took his time, meandering through entire sections of housing he'd never visited before, taking in the unique sights of all the faces he would likely never see again. By the time he returned to his own room -- his own dark, quiet room -- many of his peers had partied themselves out. It was practically tomorrow. Alone, in the bunk room he shared with only the memory of his roommate, he poured a glass of bourbon and sipped. Thoughtfully, he rearranged the rucksack he'd packed before the ceremony to accommodate the new tools the Magisters had given him. He hoped he would get far enough to use them.

The night was restless; nightmares of bosses and battles wafted from dorm room to dorm room. None of them had fooled themselves into believing their new life would be anything but hardship, but acceptance of their impending doom did little to quell the spectres that haunted them day and night. If anything, acknowledging the incoming torment only added fuel to that ghostly fire. It was not uncommon for Llewys to wake up chanting the holy rites of the Celestial Truth or begging the Holy Bearer for mercy, and tonight was no different.

It had been taught in the College that fear comes from the unknown, that if one became intimately acquainted with the object of their fear, their fear would give way to brutal, crushing rage. In that rage, there was power. This was how they were to survive the Tower. He hoped that this was one of those situations, that his new career as a Clerk was not the harrowing experience he and his classmates

and the Magisters and the rest of the *Vorena* had made it out to be. He would regularly soothe himself back to sleep with such thoughts. Little did he know, his nightmares would never be vanquished. They would only grow with time and experience. Llewys did not know that from this day forward, he would forever be haunted by ghouls unimaginable and deeds unspeakable.

So began his life as a Clerk on the starship *Vorena* in the year 25,987.

## CHAPTER TWO

Sunrise came too soon. Llewellyn lay in bed and watched as the bioluminescent lights in his dorm transitioned from red to orange, to yellow, to almost bluish-white. It was time to go. He lifted the heavier-than-usual pack with a small grunt and glanced around the dorm one last time. He left the bottle of bourbon at the shrine on his deceased roommate's bed, tightened his shoelaces, and joined the others in the hallway. They marched into the open courtyard between the barracks, lined up in platoon formation. In front of him, beside him, behind him, hundreds of new Clerk graduates stood at attention. The musky smell of battle-ready pheromones was thick in the air.

“Outboard face! Forward... March!”

Llewellyn decided he would not miss the scratchy intercom. He would not miss drill. He would not miss small talk or pop quizzes. He would probably miss hot meals from the mess hall. He would absolutely miss the atrium. It was only ten years. Ten years of work, and then he could return home to the things he enjoyed and the things he didn't. He thought these things as he and the other graduates

marched in perfect step, first side-by-side, then in a converging line, like a zipper. They followed the path out through the atrium, past the great hall, beyond the edges of the training ground, and into the entrance that would lead them to the ship's nether.

They passed through Garresh-Last, the final town before the entrance to the gateway to the ship's Hell. It was in Garresh-Last that Clerks retired after their time in the Tower. Veterans gathered solemnly along the pathway, some clapping, others weeping. Sometimes when he looked into their faces, he would catch a glimpse of the slip of a mask. Was it his imagination? Darting like wisps, sullen ghosts played along the lines of uncanny wrinkles. A ghoul peeked out of the corner of a weeping mouth like cabbage wedged between teeth. The kinds of things that inhabit centuries-old dwellings seemed to live within these men and women. How had he never noticed before? Perhaps it was just his nerves.

Kilometers beyond the Garresh-Last border, the graduates passed through the Forbidden Arch and down through the gaping maw of Blastole. Tall, sharp spires of torn, rusty metal shot up around them like a crown, like teeth, as the pitch and flickering red beacon lights swallowed them up. Despite the closeness of the campus to what was deemed the most dangerous place aboard the *Vorena*, it was still a two-day trek from the Clerk College of the Arts to their new home, the Tower.

The Tower was a massive structure whose mysterious nature was unpredictable and volatile. It was visible from all parts of the ship, despite only existing on the lowermost deck. Its many peaks and spires could be seen sporadically at the end of unrealistically long hallways, or transposed into ancient cathedral murals, or reflected in the glass of

outward-looking portholes, or from the vantage point of an old brass mirror. According to legend, The Tower showed up one unlucky day during warp travel, bending and tearing the fabric of time and space around the ship, twisting it around in curious tangles and knots, embedding the ship in an endless loop of existence both inside and outside of time. The Tower's vicinity was rife with Weird Time, Strange Phenomena, and Unsettling Occurrences. Clerks were tasked with keeping its chaos contained belowdecks, away from the rest of the world-ship's passengers.

Lewis could feel the time fluctuations beginning as they made the precarious descent into Blastole. It was the first sign that they were nearing the epicenter. After almost a full day of travel (with time dilation accounted for), they paused to rest at the site where the Holy Bearer gave The Knowledge to Grambrit the Brave. This was the same place where the Celestial Truth became known and was recorded on a stone tablet by Grambrit's brother, Avarinian, who never returned to the surface world. It was the Garden of Beatha. They held their sermon and worship there, ate in silence, and tried to sleep. All the while, The Tower loomed in the distance, shimmering like an angry oasis in the desert. Lewis dreamed of it all night. He dreamt he was standing at its base and staring up, trying to see the top of it. According to legend, the top was impossible to reach.

When the troops awoke, the Travel Guide who had led them all that way was gone. It was up to the battalion to make it to The Tower on their own. As they approached it, he found himself reaching more often for his rosary, the ten prayers of the Celestial Truth and the invocation for the Holy Bearer tingling on his tongue. Soon, they were just a few hours away. He prepared his sword, ready for any

Tower Guardians looking to take them out before they crossed the front threshold of the palace. But as they got even closer, the surrounding metal and stone treeline was eerily silent. It was like a ghost town. The place seemed empty. It was undoubtedly tainted by some evil magick, but it seemed the only souls there were the Clerks themselves.

The Tower still shimmered like a mirage, and each time Llewís looked away to check the perimeter, he could swear the building was much smaller than he thought it would be. But whenever his gaze inevitably returned to the glimmering gray-white structure, it seemed to have grown ten times taller than before, and the jagged spikes and buildings surrounding it seemed to glare at him with the hungry gleam of a lioncat's fangs. The place was drawing him in, and he knew it. Carefully, he unsheathed his sword and wrapped the rosary around the hilt. The threshold was in sight, and its portcullis was wide open. Gaping. Hungry.

"May Vyharæ the Holy have mercy on our souls," Chordisius said from the front of the pack, a monstrous flail and buckler in her hands.

A glance around Llewís showed every one of his comrades strapping themselves in for the fight of their life. Still, no enemy presented itself. There were only the Clerks and the Tower.

"Are you ready?" Chordisius asked, her voice deep and strong. There was a quiet shout from the crowd. "I said, are! You! Ready!" She screamed, her almost-primal cry echoing around the boundless nether, bouncing off the unseen walls of the ship's bowels. The warrior shout and clanging of armor and weapons that came in response rattled Llewís' bones.

From the edges of the Crystal Forest came the rumbling growl of hungry daemons.

## CHAPTER THREE

**N**o one expected Chordisius to die so early. The unfortunate fact that she, the revered valedictorian of cycle 244 at the Clerk United College of the Arts, who was rooting for every one of her classmates, who was supposed to lead them across the threshold into their new lives as Clerks of the Tower, was the very first to fall. And the way Llewys figured, not even the Magisters could have guessed how it went down.

After Chordisius rallied the troops, there was a moment of silence. Everyone watched as she walked with long, unwavering strides to the castle gate. It was her task to ring the bell that heralded the arrival of new Clerks. This way, the others already dwelling and fighting within the Tower could take heart at the knowledge of reinforcements, of one more year of service completed. For a lucky few, this would be the tenth tolling. It signaled the end of their battle.

With each step Chordisius took, the growl of hungry beasts seemed to amplify. She hesitated for a moment, then grabbed a deep breath and crossed the threshold into the mouth of the hungry castle where, just inside, to the right

of the portcullis, was the bell chamber. As she entered, there was a great and mysterious groan that set all the troops' teeth on edge. Llewys felt it in his bones, this age-old, ancient anger vibrating at some terrifyingly unfathomable depth beneath the Tower and the surrounding Crystal Forest. Suddenly, he was filled with the sensation of standing over a very steep ledge with his toes hanging off.

And then the bell rang. Ten chimes, symbolic of the ten prayers of the Celestial Truth, rang out through the ship's sublevel, and for a moment, all that could be heard was the resounding echo of the tolling of the bell. The Clerks stood in silent reverie, as they had been instructed to do until the final echoes of the tenth bell ceased. Then, line by line, in perfect step, they moved across the moat bridge in three long columns to file inside the looming Tower. Llewys was somewhere near the front-middle of the cue. He still felt the impossible vertigo of standing over a great crevasse and so moved with lurching steps alongside his brothers and sisters.

And then, as the first line of warriors passed into the shadow of the portcullis, there came a terrible and sharp cracking sound. It was a sound Llewys would grow used to during his service at the Tower, though this was the first time he ever heard it. It was like the noise of a dry-rotted tree snapping under some immense weight, but somehow loud enough to be palpable in his very soul. It made his blood run cold. He was of the last to pull his broadsword to the fore. He was also, however, one of the first to see the river of blood bubble up from beneath the bridge. In mere seconds, a third of the complement was swept off their feet and thrown helplessly downstream to the castle's rear by the raging, swirling torrent.

There was a horrified shout from the portcullis, and

Lewis saw his opportunity to lend aid to his fellow Clerks. He ran across the bridge, forcing his way through the red current that had swollen up to overtake the bridge and the river banks. It was slippery work, his feet constantly sliding against the rounded cement of the bridge as the surge threatened to pull him into its depths. He was nearing the portcullis when the world became sideways and red. He spilled over the ledge like an open sack of potatoes, clinging tightly to his sword with one hand and blindly grasping for a handhold with the other.

He fought against the current as it dipped and tugged and threw him. His mouth soured with the taste of hot metal, and his eyes burned with the sting of salt and fat. Each time he was sucked into a whirlpool, he was also plunged into pitch darkness. One of those times, he found himself at the pure bottom of the river, pressed hard to its floor either by the weight of his armor or by the will of the Tower.

But down there were handholds and footholds in the shape of stones and roots and shields that had dug themselves into the dirt. He flipped onto his stomach, his lungs burning with the need for the air they had craved for way too long now. His head swam, dizzy from lack. He willed his arms and legs to move. He crawled himself, heavy and depleted, onto the bank of the moat. Blood soaked, he looked up, and there he saw it. He saw what had made that gut-wrenching cracking sound, and between coughs and gasps, he spilled his stomach at the base of the Tower.

But he couldn't stay where he was. There was no time to catch his breath or regain his bearings or try to comprehend the scene before his eyes. Waves of the bloody river lapped at his ankles, forming fingers and entire hands intent upon dragging him back down to his doom. He

kicked at them as he crawled up toward the point where the bridge met the castle. Each time he pulled away, the hands gripped him more firmly and pulled harder, matching his strength in a mocking kind of game. Angry, he growled and screamed, hacking at the sinewy appendages with his sword as he inched his way away from the water.

Water. It was just water now. Llewys was covered in blood, but the moat was just muddy water, no deeper than half the height of a man. And he now had to find his way up onto the bridge again, lest he brave crossing the moat the other direction and scrambling up the muddy bank there. He most certainly did *not* want to do that. He also did not want to go onto the bridge, or into the portcullis, or deeper inside the castle. He did not want to face the monsters in there. He wanted to go home. But he pressed on anyway. It was his duty.

He found some uneven stones at the base of the Tower, which formed a simple ladder he could climb until the ledge of the bridge was in reach. It was almost too easy to get up and onto the path inside the Tower. Like he was being led back into the fray, so the Tower could play with him some more. He had his eyes shut the whole time, dreading the view he would have to see inside the entryway. He whispered a prayer when his feet touched the dry, flat surface of the bridge. Sword gripped tight, he opened his eyes and charged in.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Lewis had left the College thinking he was prepared to face the worst that the Tower could possibly have to offer. He could not have been more wrong, and he felt that wrongness in his soul. His entire being had become a housing complex for the feelings borne of the merciless torment of that dreadful place. Every corner he rounded brought some new, unspeakable horror. Every Boss he demolished brought a new, more terrible foe to face. But, somehow, the competition of it all was enough to fuel him forward. It came as a surprise, even to himself, that he had slain the most monsters of anyone in his class.

Lewis dug through the slimy skin folds of the most recent daemon he'd destroyed. The thing was steaming as it began to rot, a puddle of brackish water pooling beneath it. The stench was horrible. Fingers digging through the hot pocket of the beast, he finally found what he was looking for. Trails of orange-ish goo dripped from the crystal shard he pulled from the depths. He tucked it into his satchel and swiveled on his heel. *Gotta keep moving.* Leave a kill as quickly as possible. Find a quiet place to rest and get the

stench of battle off your clothes. He'd learned that lesson too many times over.

The cut on his cheek stung from the sweat and dirt that filled it. His shoulder ached from swinging his sword hard enough to hack off the tentacle-like appendage of that particular daemon's thorax. Llewys tucked himself into a crevice in the rock wall far enough away from the kill to avoid being detected but close enough that its dying stench would disguise the smell of his being alive. Wedged in, he rested and contemplated his life up to this point. Thanks to the time dilation and the lack of discernible day/night cycles, it was impossible to know how long he had been at the Tower. All the while, he had been hunting the monstrosity that was using Chordisius' body.

The Tower, with its seemingly endless halls and impossibly cavernous wings. The Tower, with its impossibly cramped, labyrinthian hidden passages. It offered the monstrosities endless places to hide, and it provided him endless places to become hopelessly lost. No matter how high he went on winding staircases, there was always an unattainable number of floors to go. No matter how deep into the ground he went, he never found the end of winding passageways and dank dungeons. No matter how close he got to the outer walls, there were always acres between him and the possibility of crossing back into the spaceship he was pretty sure he had lived in before his life in the Tower.

Llewys had lost track of where the entrance was quite some time ago, but he did remember the first time he saw his quarry. That moment, as he lay on the banks of the moat so long ago, and again when his feet touched the bridge's cement where so many of his battle brothers and sisters died before they could live his waking nightmare.

Every single person in the complement had heard the

sound, though. The unmistakable *sound*. Like a house collapsing under flame or an ancient tree being felled back on the Earth that was. But the sound represented nothing so beautiful as those comparisons. It was much more haunting than anything in the natural world could ever conjure.

Chordisius, the strongest and bravest of them all, had been de-spined. It sounded exactly like what it was. Spine yanked out from the back, ribs still intact, sometimes organs or sinew tangled up in them. Always threads of spinal cord dangling off the wet vertebrae. This had to happen for the daemon to be able to inhabit her body. The late valedictorian was simply a meat puppet, and the daemon needed room to make improvements. Lewis had watched this happen a hundred times over, and he knew he would watch it a million times more before he died, probably a death by de-spining. There was always a moment when the body stood rigid, spasming outward with the shock of losing every connection to the brain. Then, before the carcass had time to hit the floor, it was occupied, bulging, growing, tearing, sometimes eyes still wide and mouth agape in an impossible scream, as a beast burrowed in.

From there, things moved fast. Viscera would spew from the body like protein paste from a MealPak as the monster bonded with the meat suit. Then the mutations would start. The whole process would take maybe three seconds at most, but Lewis had watched it happen so many times he knew it by heart. He could close his eyes and visualize it all in slow motion.

It was often the only thing he *could* see when he closed his eyes. The sharp spikes jutting out of backs, oozing with venom and mucus. The shoulderblades growing into bone-

wings, stretching skin beyond where it should break, a thin membrane of patagium lined with angry black veins. The hungry beaks splitting a head into two, sometimes even three deadly-sharp maws. And the eyes. So many eyes, every last one in the completely wrong place.

No matter how many times he witnessed it, he would always be haunted by the first time he bore witness to the horrifying transformation. Of all the images that played themselves over and over in his mind, the one that ruled his nightmares was Chordisius's final form, slashing its way through an entire squad of Clerks as Lewis was grappling his way out of the moat.

When he had reached the top of the bridge, it waited for him to open his eyes before it made its attack. It seemed unusual to him at first. Why wait for an enemy to see you before cutting it down. But eventually, he learned, from stalking the beast, that it loved to watch the fear and realization of death wash over its prey. It savored the terror and the finality of it all. Alive eyes look different from dead ones.

Lewis would never admit aloud how much he understood, even craved, the feeling of taking a life. But the lives he took were monstrosities, not human. The beasts he cut down were malicious, hungry, chaos-mongers. He and his sword were bringers of peace. Every head he cut off, every eye he glazed over with eternal rest, was one less harbinger of the horror that threatened to overwhelm his home. That was what divided him from the daemons, and he held on to that knowledge every night he stole away into a castle crevice to catch a wink of restless sleep.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Lewis's kill count was prolific. But he knew that no kill would satisfy him the way slaying the Chordisius monster would. He knew others from his class had their sights set on the tainted valedictorian; he wanted to team up with them to defeat her. He also knew that was never going to happen. The Tower's magick was tricky, and it often cast a glamour over the people inside. Under the Tower's powerful veil, it was impossible to trust memories to remain solid, words to be heard with any sense of clarity, or actions to have their intended consequences. Everything was unstable, no one was sane, and joining forces could only result in unspeakable disaster for all involved.

But even as L Lewis tried to conjure the images of his former classmates, the Tower demanded his attention. He heard the sound of running footsteps coming up the corridor beside him. He pressed further into the crack, glancing out just past the edge of the wall. He saw two Clerks running at full speed toward him. One looked quite old, but his scarred face was familiar. The other was too young for L Lewis to have known him from the College. But

who they were barely mattered long enough for Lewis to think about how their names might have felt on his tongue, because they were cut down about ten yards away from his hiding place.

The creature had sliced them in half like warm butter, then moved over them to slurp up their insides, its many forked tongues slithering in and out, carrying organs into its mouths like oliphant trunks with roots dug up from a wet riverbank. The daemon spanned the height and width of the hallway, unmistakable in its stature and uncanny speed. This was the Chordisius monster, and it had no idea Lewis was watching it. It was rare to see a daemon actually eating because daemons only ate to savor their kills. If someone was close enough to watch a daemon chow down, there was a high chance that person was the daemon's lunch.

Lewis couldn't remember the last time he had a chance like this. *It must be destiny.* He uttered a prayer of gratitude to the Holy Bearer and quietly dislodged himself from the hole in the wall. The thing was still bent over the carcasses, the broad of its back offering itself up to him like a hecatomb at the altar. Lewis just needed to get a little closer. It had to happen fast if it was going to happen at all. The creature grunted and shifted as it ate, still oblivious to his approach. He inched closer, step by step, sizing up the beast as he had done a million times over – only this time, he had the advantage. He dug his feet into the ground, pulling his sword from its sheath. He was mapping his attack when the wind shifted.

He had been found out.

At last aware that it was not alone, the beast turned and bellowed a stinky, wet howl. He only had seconds, if not less, to make his move. Without hesitation, he plunged

forward, driving his sword into the Chordisius-thing's gaping, growling maw. It choked on the blade, spewing blood and mucus from its throat, the other mouths wailing and snapping at Llewys as he jumped backward and prepared to attack again.

Chrodisius' wings flapped in agitation, breaking chunks of stone off the walls as it propelled itself at the warrior. Llewys could not dodge; the beast took up the whole corridor. He could not duck because the thing's undercarriage was too low to the ground to fit him without decapitation. So he braced himself, holding his sword where he hoped it would pierce the thing's chest and stop its tangle of hearts.

It felt as though time slowed as he watched the monstrosity bounding toward him, its three paws digging craters into the floor, bloody froth dribbling from all three mouths. He returned the glare from its eight unblinking eyes with equal rage, matching the mutant's scream in pitch and ferocity as the two collided. He felt the sword hit fur, then flesh, then bone, and when it slid just past that, the beast body-slammed him to the ground.

It flailed, pecking at him with beaky teeth, claws scratching ribbons in his armor and flesh. A puddle of blood pooled around the pair, soaking into the stone floor. Llewys knew he had met his end, but even as stars filled his vision, he had enough sense to twist the blade, carving up the inside of the creature's chest. It let loose a deafening scream and pulled back. Llewys gripped the sword hard so the thing did not take his weapon with it when it left him there to die. Relieved of the weight of the daemon, he took a full, ragged breath. Bones snapped and crackled, pain racked his body, and the world went dark.

He woke up some unknowable time later to the sound of ten bells tolling in the distance. Chordisius' malformed

face stared at him from across the hallway, dead eyes melting in the hot steam of decaying daemon. Lewis painstakingly rolled onto his side, and then his stomach, and dragged himself back toward the hole where he'd been resting before the beast threw itself into his crosshairs. Much of him was broken and torn, but he had lived through similar circumstances before. He recited prayers to distract him from the pain as he crawled into a new, lower crack that had formed when the beast beat its wings against the walls.

There, cradled by the Tower, he let himself drift back into the embrace of the Holy Bearer, of cold stone on hot wounds, of the dark whispers of the Celestial Truth, of the knowledge that he had avenged Chordisius' death, and the hope that the bells would soon ring for him, too.

