

A GLINT IN THE DARKNESS

A Short Story

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Clarence was seated on the balcony, overseeing the procession. The day was grey and heavy with clouds. The air was filled with chimney smoke and the fragrance of Somayan frankincense, spreading from the many censers. They always bought the best frankincense.

'The Radiant have performed quite well yet another year, don't you think, Your Speakership?'

The question came at Clarence from the senior priest. He nodded ever so slightly to the priest and listened to the blaring howl of the horns:

'Eeee-ooohmm!'

'Boo-ah-oooh!'

They were singing to Clarence. To the unenlightened, these sounds could be dismal or even depressing, but to the Exalted Clarence, Speaker of the Crystal Eye and head of the church's hierarchy, they were the way to the Light.

One of the saints, moving in the procession, quickly raised his eyes to the grey sky, before settling them back on the ground, where they belonged.

A fine rain fell on the sufferers, as they dragged their chained feet through the ground.

There was a slight breeze and suddenly--

'Aaah!' Clarence's cry echoed over the plaza.

The procession froze. The horns silenced.

The Exalted Clarence was twisted, kneeling on the ground, hands pressed to his temples.

He was groaning!

The priests all scrambled around him in a bustle. The Exalted One was still holding his head, moaning. A bit of spittle wet his mouth.

About a minute later, the senior priest called out over the quiet procession:

'The Exalted Clarence, Speaker of the Crystal Eye that's always gazing into the Light, had an epiphany. The procession may end.'

'Be-ah-oooh-ah-oooh,' the horns confirmed.

Slowly dragging themselves, the sufferers dispersed.

The Exalted Clarence slowly raised his eyelids. He saw the canopy of his own bed. He was in his own room. He closed his eyes again and reached out from the covers, groping for the bell on the bedside table.

A moment later, a junior servant appeared.

'At your service, Exalted One,' he bowed.

'Bring me some water,' the Exalted One whispered hoarsely. Then, after a pause, 'And some wine.'

He was still unable to shake off the nightmare. He tried to recall the events and he shivered. He remembered sitting in the loge, watching the procession, when the vision had appeared to him. This time it was so real, so close and visceral, that it had consumed his entire body, as if he were taking part in the events himself. The horrid flashes had first appeared about a month ago, initially just as fleeting thoughts or faded memories.

'A memory of another lifetime?' Clarence thought and shivered once more.

Gradually, the seizures had grown stronger, and they would overtake him more and more often, until this last one, the most powerful and meaningful, a meaning he couldn't face.

Clarence curled into a ball under the sheet. These illusions weren't real and they would be over as soon as tomorrow. There was some kind of mistake. He would go and pray to the Crystal Eye and then it would all be over. It would all be over.

There was a knock on the door.

Clarence stuck his head out from under the sheet and said hoarsely, 'Yes!'

The junior servant came in, left a jug of water, a decanter of wine, and two glasses on the bedside table.

The Master Preacher and Head of the Holy Servants, Marcantius, who was second in hierarchy only to Clarence, was sitting in his personal dining room, patiently observing a spider, spinning a wriggling fly into a tight bundle.

He was alone. He liked to dine alone and reflect on the issues of the modern world, of which there were many.

'If it is not ruled correctly,' he liked saying, 'the modern religious society will vanish in the darkness of chaos in a matter of a few months.'

And everyone agreed with him.

Did they have any other choice?

Now, though, his thoughts were flowing in a different direction. They were gravitating around a very particular part of modern society, to which he belonged himself - the exalted elite. The so-called "visions" of the exalted Clarence were beginning to bother Marcantius. This was the first time the monthly Procession of Suffering was disturbed in this manner, unhappily. He liked order. In fact, he loved order, and that is why he had risen so high in the holy hierarchy. The other thing that he liked were the orderly and ceremonial processions.

He sighed, chuckled the leftover bone on the plate, licked his fingers, and got up from the chair.

In the antechamber of the Exalted Clarence, Speaker of the Crystal Eye, about a dozen prominent figures were gathered: priests, scholars, and politicians, all eager to know what the Exalted One's latest vision had contained. They had been waiting for quite a while and were already frustrated, but after all, he was the eminent Speaker and they could not possibly rebuke his lack of punctuality.

Or, more accurately, his delay. He probably had many other important affairs to attend to.

Clarence drank the wine, still in bed. He left the water for later. The nightmares had loosened their grip on him and he was starting to think once more that all this would eventually blow over, like his cold two weeks ago. After all, he could not afford to be bothered by some measly visions, let alone in broad daylight. He shivered and quickly directed his thoughts to a certain walk in the hunting park. Or he could visit the Temple of the Eyelash - the female clan of the Eye Cult. But they were still occupied with the finishing rites of today's procession, and furthermore, Lady Smag was cross with him.

Perhaps last time he was too harsh with the instructions for the young girls in worship.

He decided he would let things settle down on their own and he would give in to the walk, after which he could attend a performance by the Palace's Circus Group. That sounded good.

There was a knock on the door.

'Yes!' Clarence said.

The door opened ajar and his personal butler stuck his head through.

'Your Eminence, the Special Occurrences Commission is expecting you!'

'Huh?' Clarence exclaimed. His face swiftly grew weary. 'How—Erm,' he stammered, 'Tell them I can't receive them right now.'

'But, Your Speakership, they have been waiting for more than an hour now. They are very worried and eager to know the details of your latest vision.'

'What vision?' he said, surprised. 'In fact, who summoned them without my permission?'

'The Exalted Marcantius, Your Speakership.'

'Oh,' Clarence understood.

He considered for a moment, bringing the room to silence. A minute later, he said, 'All right, let them know I'll receive them, but I need time. I need to take in my vision. They can stay in the antechamber. You can go now.'

The butler slid his head back and shut the door. '*Ah, Marcantius!*' Clarence thought to himself. Marcantius would always put him in unpleasant situations, from which he had to find a way out the hard way. Couldn't Marcantius just leave him be and live the sweet life of Speaker of the Eye? Clarence had just come up with a plan about what to do and those people from the Special Occurrences Commission-- obnoxious people that one should approach with much caution-- had too much power.

'*Well, not more than me,*' Clarence thought to himself, '*but still!*' They definitely had to be approached with caution. With great reluctance, he slid out of the warm bed. He shivered and quickly threw his robe on. He shivered again, as the robe was cold, too.

'I have to receive them,' he said to himself and dragged his feet towards the bathroom.

Carmer Danks was in a very bad mood. Not only did he have to do the dirtiest work, but he was also ignored by everyone. Being ignored was normal, but this exact thought never occurred to him. All he cared about was that there was a problem in his assigned torture facility, but the priests in charge were too stuck up to deal with it, and it was the seventh time they told him to ignore it and attend to his duties. But how could he attend to his duties, when there was a problem? His people were also upset, they would blabber some nonsense about prophecies, old fairy tales and other crap, as if they were waiting on a miracle. Some even dared say that the miracle was already happening and it would put an end to the existing system and social order.

Carmer Danks didn't like this one bit and he had already handed out some disciplinary action, even though he was not a fan of punishing his own men. Not that he was scrupulous about the humanity and painfulness of the punishment; he just had his own special management philosophy that he

considered very right and valuable, and which, he believed he had invented himself.

His philosophy was based on order.

‘There should be order!’ he would say. ‘There should be order and people should listen carefully and do exactly as they are told, no questions asked. Also, people should be afraid of their superiors. Then they wouldn’t have to be punished, because they would do everything quickly and correctly. If, however, there is a necessity for punishment, then...’

Then things definitely took a turn for the worst. That’s exactly what was happening at the moment. He could smell disobedience. And it was all because of the cursed visions. Just give an ignorant man something puzzling and unexplainable and he will jump straight to upturning the social order. And that is just not right.

The problem was, even Carmer Danks himself was starting to worry because of this inexplicable phenomenon. The fourteenth one in a row had passed several hours earlier and it was so powerful and so bright that shivers ran down his spine while watching it. Some residual glimmers still sparkled in his eyes.

Of course, he had reported it right away and, of course, he was told to ignore it, just like before. He recalled that it had all started about a month ago, in the Chamber of the Rotting. Chamber of the Rotting! Just thinking of these words made his nose and face wrinkle with disgust. It was the most repulsive, most avoided and most foul-smelling place in all of the torture facilities. He didn’t like going there, so, when a month earlier the first observed event was reported to him, he recalled the existence of this place in his assigned torture facilities. In addition, there were people working in that place, or at least around that place, but they had been doing it for a while and they were probably used to the sights, and mostly – the stench.

His nose wrinkled again.

Carmer had done exactly what his superiors were instructing him to do now: ignore the event and command that work should go on. After the third event, though, he had started to worry, and after the seventh one he thought it was high time to report it to his superiors. He had even assigned a designated observer to notify him when a new event was starting. In spite of his great reluctance, he started going “there” to see things with his own eyes. These events didn’t take place at specific intervals, but there was a different consistency that they had – their power kept growing.

In the beginning, he just caught the end of the event, as it was brief and somewhat blurry and unclear, and they were also far away from his office (not a coincidence at all). Each new one, however, was clearer and brighter. It started with a slight motion in the air, which was generally impossible in that location; that was followed by some minor static; then suddenly, in the middle of the chamber, just above the heap of bodies, a light mist started to shape, filled with odd vortexes. That was about the time when Carmer Danks managed to arrive at the vantage point above the chamber and slightly to the right. From that point on, he knew exactly what followed: the mist condensed into an opaque, gray-black darkness, followed by a flash, and then a fireball appeared in the middle of the now fierce whirlwind. Gradually, the flames in the orb gained power and it expanded, until it... Despite his disgust and the stifling stench, Carmer always bent over slightly at this point. It was the strangest thing he had ever seen: amid the flames, the outline of a door appeared. The doorway emerged from the depths: a large, solid double door,

made out of old wood, impregnated with pitch, and studded with thick iron bands. Despite the pitch, the wood looked rotten, the metal – corroded. Above the door, the sculpture of a grotesque face, contorted in pain, always made Carmer look away.

The door stood like that for a while, impressive in its silent solidity, before suddenly disappearing back into the flames, followed abruptly by the entire phenomenon.

After each event, Carmer went back to his office more worried, he approached his work more seriously and gave stricter punishment to his more disobedient subordinates.

He didn't like this at all and he terribly wished for its end. He didn't like unknown things at all, and he liked worrying even less. What he liked the least, though, was that for the first time in his life, he didn't know what was going on and he had no idea how to get rid of it, despite considering various methods, including shutting down the chamber entirely. At least for a while, until things blew over. All kinds of ideas had occurred to him, until the last phenomenon took place. The last phenomenon, which had passed about two hours ago, which made him lean so hard over the disgusting chamber, that he almost fell inside it.

Because, for the first time, the door had creaked open.

The Exalted Clarence, Speaker of the Crystal Eye, looked at himself in the mirror, while the servant fixed the last details of his parade robe. He was satisfied with the result. At least one thing was right in this confused day, which was already approaching its end.

The urgently summoned Special Occurrences Commission, consisting mostly of eminent and influential figures, had been waiting on His Benevolence all afternoon. Now the distinguished individuals were preoccupied mostly with their petty frustrations and made desperate effort to maintain the smiles on their faces.

Finally, the long-awaited news: the Exalted Clarence was ready to receive them. A murmur and sighs of relief spread across the small, yet neat antechamber. Led by the senior butler, the eminent people took their drinks and headed to the council chamber, where His Speakership was expecting them. It was a hall of moderate proportions with tall, narrow windows, heavy drapes and a marble floor. The Commission members seated themselves on the sturdy, wooden chairs, especially arranged in a semi-circle. The short ceremony for the appearance commenced.

'The Exalted, brightest and wisest, eminent and singular, the all-powerful Speaker of the Crystal Eye that sees everything in the world, His Speakership and Clairvoyance, Clarence the Enlightener!'

In the dark left corner of the hall, a streak of light appeared and gave shape to a human silhouette. The shadow quickly grew larger and approached the gathered members of the Commission. A gong was struck two times, after which the servants pulled the drapes and the hall was flooded with light. The shadow gave way to the ornate parade robe of the smiling Clarence, who sat back in his throne.

'Welcome, dear Commission!' he began. 'I am glad you found the time to share with me the last vision that the Crystal Eye sent me, and to contemplate its spiritual meaning.'

The Commission members nodded in agreement, easing into their armchairs. Clarence hadn't yet decided what to tell the Commission and what to keep to himself, so he started his speech in such a way as to buy himself a little time.

'As you well know, our society has a strict defined religious structure. We all follow the way, shown by the flowing light of the Eye, whose most loyal follower and exegetist is me.'

He made a short pause and the Commission members shuffled in their seats.

'The Eye prescribed that our holy country should have a very strict hierarchy. This is the only way that our land would rise to the top of the mountain, to the radiant light, where the sun rises and the Eye is always watchful!'

Clarence was gaining momentum. Perhaps he was starting to figure out how to throw dust in the eyes of the Commission.

'Since our society is quite small, the ruling ones are but a few. The eminent individuals, the Eye-watched, who stand closest to the light, are but a few. As you know, in the very dawn of our country, when the first settlers came to the vast Valley of the Heavenly Spring, which we still inhabit today, the Eye gazed upon six holy families. They begat the six holy lineages, from which all nobles in the Valley descend. Of course, we here also descend from those six holy families.'

The Commission members nodded and lowered their eyes to their drinks. Surprise was creeping onto their faces.

'All the rest of those first settlers,' Clarence continued, 'were appointed by the Eye as servants. However, these servants also follow a strict caste division and each of them diligently contribute to society.'

Broxa was a cleaner, part of the staff of the torture facility, and his task was to throw the dead into the Chamber of the Rotting. He disliked his job. In fact, he hadn't met anyone who liked their job in the torture facility, except perhaps Senior Torturer, Carmer Danks. But even he showed resentment sometimes, especially when coming to the Chamber of the Rotting. They couldn't do anything about it: they were all born in the lower class of society. He sighed. He knew he didn't have the right to entertain such thoughts. He knew that, if he served the Eye diligently and conscientiously, some day he would be reborn in the higher class of society, perhaps even as a Speaker. He shook his head, sighed again and his face quickly twisted in a grimace. A bit too much of the thick, sticky air had rushed into his lungs. He felt the smell and, worse, the taste.

Broxa was starting to feel ever more strongly as if he was being punished. When he was a cleaner, he could at least walk around, approach the Chamber and then go further from it; but now he was stationed right next to it. On top of it all, he had to look inside. Senior Torturer Danks apparently had a grudge. He had ordered him to keep watching for one of those strange things that happened inside. Broxa didn't want to know at all what was going on in there and why. He was not interested in it at all. He wasn't interested in anything inside that Chamber. What he did want, though, was for that crap to happen again, so he could run at full speed towards Senior Danks's office and away from this place.

'In the lowest levels of society,' Clarence recited for the bored Commission members, 'are the slobs, who are content with food leftovers and tending the lavatories.'

He made a brief pause, which incited a torrent of throat clearing, grunting, and attentive beverage drinking.

'As we all know very well,' he went on with a deep, calm voice, 'the All-seeing Eye is our lord, who shows us the way to the light, and we are but his humble servants.'

He paused.

'I am the one, burdened with the heavy task of listening to the Eye's words and passing his sermon on to all his children. Today, the Eye gave me a very important piece of guidance.'

Clarence sighed, the Commission perked up their ears.

'As we all know very well,' he hesitated a little. 'All inferior servants are obliged to visit their assigned torture facility every day, and carry the weight of life on their shoulders--' His face contorted and his stomach was suddenly gripped with pain. 'So we can all walk forward--' His face twisted once again. 'To the Light!'

He stopped, panting. He felt it starting again, the first symptoms already manifesting. He couldn't bear another nightmare. Not today! He stood for a while, breathing heavily, gazing at the empty space in front of the Commission. Maybe it was loosening its grip, maybe this time it would let go of him. He decided to get it over with this meeting, fast. He was just about to start the last part of his speech, which would patch things up and send the Commissioners to their homes, when the senior master of ceremonies approached him and leaned over his shoulder.

'Your Speakership, the Exalted Marcantius has important news for you. He's waiting for you in the guest room.'

'I'm in a meeting!' Clarence hissed.

'Your Speakership, he insisted it was urgent and you should hear him immediately.'

Clarence mulled it over, drumming his fingers on the armrest. In fact, this was a good reason to show the Commission who was on top.

'Excuse me for a moment, Your Excellencies,' he said. Then, he stood up and followed the master of ceremonies, leaving behind a fidgety murmur.

Broxa was busy picking a blister on his face, when he felt a slight movement of the air and heard the quiet crackle of static. He immediately sprang to his feet and leaned over the railing, staring into the bottom of the Chamber. He stood like that for a couple of seconds, holding his breath. Everything was silent and still. Was an occurrence about to happen, or not? He had to be sure, before rushing to Danks's office, or else he would be punished. He stood at his post.

'These phenomena are starting to occur too frequently,' Marcantius explained. 'I'm afraid that circumstances might slip out of our control.'

Clarence stopped pacing around the room for a moment and looked at him thoughtfully.

'The Senior Torturer reported some displeasing unrest and disobedience among inferior torturers. Considering the circumstances of last winter and the repeatedly bad harvest this fall, this will not ring well with the masses, if they accidentally catch word of it.'

Clarence stopped pacing once again.

'Not catching a word of it is your job, and I advise you to be very good at it!' Clarence emphasized, his finger pointing at Marcantius.

'Your Speakership, do you doubt my abilities?'

'No,' Clarence said after reflecting shortly and continued pacing in a circle around the room.

'There is one more thing,' Marcantius began. 'Your visions--'

'My visions what?' Clarence exclaimed.

'Well, the Special Occurrences Commission is worried, and--'

'Why did you have to summon them right now, Marcantius?' Clarence interrupted him.

'Your Holiness, they insisted! They are worried about your health.'

'Hmpf!' Clarence snorted disparagingly, starting a new circle.

'Still,' Marcantius started, 'the Representative Circle of the Inferiors is making too much of a fuss around trade with the Pertans, which we initiated due to our poor harvest. I am afraid that the dark interests of some circles of society are receiving larger support, and when we add the problems on our western border--'

'Let's leave politics to the Commission, Marcantius! We are holy men, we cannot deal with everything at once!'

A moment of silence fell on them.

'Of course, Your Clairvoyance,' said Marcantius.

'Make an effort to keep these occurrences between the walls of that place. The inferior interests I also leave to you, and as far as our foreign policy is concerned, I think the Commission is competent enough, but I will also give them some guidance,' Clarence smiled slightly. 'That will be all for now,' he concluded and set out for the door.

'About those occurrences--' Marcantius stammered.

Clarence had just put his hand on the doorknob, but he turned and gave Marcantius an ambiguous look.

'--Senior Torturer Danks said that the last one was different, he said it ended in a different way.'

Clarence's face was now devoid of all emotion.

'Yes?' he said, dryly.

'Well, that door... It opened!'

The Exalted One visibly shivered. In this dim light, it was hard to tell if his face had turned pale. He nodded and started to turn around.

'Through the door,' Marcantius was bent on finishing, 'he said he saw Heaven through the door!'

The Exalted One froze. He stood like that for a while, as Marcantius watched carefully; then Clarence sharply opened the door and left.

The members of the Special Occurrences Commission were now seriously upset by the neglectful attitude that the Exalted Speaker was demonstrating towards them. It was true that his high stature imposed great responsibility

and took a lot of this time, but still! They did not feel unimportant, either, and they did not feel like they deserved to spend an entire afternoon waiting. Such thoughts and worse were passing through their minds, when he rushed into the room, worried and slightly pale. He took his seat and turned to them.

'Your Excellencies, important matters have arisen, so I will be brief.

We all know that the inferior members of our society actually support our well-being, but, as the Eye has commanded, they must visit the local torture facility every day-- Aaagh...'

The Exalted One squirmed and put his hands around his head. He was grunting, leaning forward, and spit dribbled from his mouth. He thought he hadn't wanted to say those exact words. The members of the Commission were gaping in disbelief. There was a flurry of whispers among them. Could the Exalted One have lost his mind? How could he speak of tradition with such vulgar words...?

Broxa had seen enough. He was certain now. He ran as fast as he could towards Carmer Danks's office. At last!

...Clarence pulled himself together and stood up. His eyes were glazed, his face - completely white. The words he uttered seemed to come from someone else's mouth:

'They go down there, they work and moan, while we keep silent.' His face contorted and regained some blush. He reached for his head and almost whispered:

'But we know that is the right way... the Eye said... it's right!'

He stood petrified again and thundered:

'But sometimes they die a painful, lonely death, and we throw them down there, into oblivion. We reject them... And no one has said anything! In not one of the periods!'

He slumped again and wheezed:

'We didn't know... We thought...'

'We must go there!' said the other voice in Clarence.

'There?'

'We must go there... We must!'

'...But there...'

'WE MUST! THERE!'

Clarence curled up into a very small ball on his chair. A moaning, shaking ball.

A moment of silence fell in the room and the Commission's members' jaws gaped open; not one of them had been able to understand the meaning of the weird dialogue they had just witnessed.

Clarence suddenly stood up. His face was white again, his eyes - crystal clear and somehow sharp. His figure was commanding and confident - something quite uncharacteristic of him.

'Follow me!' he barked at the startled Commission, before turning and going towards the door.

No one moved. Only eleven pairs of eyes followed the Exalted Speaker, mesmerized.

He stopped halfway to the door and turned around, very slowly.

'I SAID, FOLLOW ME!'

His titanic voice filled the entire room. The drapes fluttered, and the Commission members jumped up, as if stung. Obediently, like sheep, they followed their master.

Carmer Danks was immersed in re-reading *The Torturer's Code* yet again, when junior cleaner Broxa rushed into his room, tripped on the doorstep and fell face down on the floor. Carmer reached out to the guards bell, but Broxa's sweaty face lifted off the ground and he panted:

'Forgive me, my lord, it is starting!'

'What is starting, you simple-minded worm?'

'It is the occurrence! It is starting! And it is huge! The entire Chamber is crackling!'

'Guaaaards!' he yelled.

The Exalted Clarence's cloak was flapping in his wake as he strode vigorously down the hallways, followed by the scurrying members of the Special Occurrences Commission.

Yet another pair of guards fell face down in the dirt, when they saw him.

'Get my porters here NOW!' Carmer was yelling. 'Get all the martyrs out of the Chamber and shut the corridors. I need a messenger here immediately! This time I will report directly to his Exalted Speakership!' Carmer raised his eyes to the ceiling; everyone made the holy gesture, when the shroud-white General Secretary rushed into the room.

'He, he, he--' stumbled the Secretary.

Someone splashed a glass of water on his face. The General Secretary came to his senses.

'His Speakership is on his way!' he managed, shaking.

A moment of silence fell in the hall.

'What did you just say?' said Carmer through clenched teeth.

'His Exalted Speakership Clarence the Enlightener is on his way here!'

'You mean, HERE?'

'Well, yes, I mean-- No, I-- Yes, he is--' the Secretary stammered. 'He is actually going to the Chamber!'

Another short silence.

'Where are my porters??!!'

A whirlwind of commotion took over.

Yet another company of torturers, together with their martyrs, sprawled face down in the dirt, making way for His Exalted Speakership. His heels clattered on the bars of a torture cell in the floor. The Special Occurrences Commission followed him steadily, but most of its members had cupped their noses in hands, pulling away with disgust from the reverent people. They were getting closer!

Yet another gloomy corridor, some stairs, a turn, then more stairs and, after they passed through the last vestibule, the Chamber of the Rotting was before them, in all its dark glory.

A stench hit them, thick as a liquid. A few members of the Commission vomited. They were standing on the edge of a cylindrical pit, a hundred meters wide and fifty meters deep. The ceiling spread high above them, forming a huge, three-hundred-meter-deep cavern. This was the core of the central and largest torture facility. The entire site was constructed with massive, angular stone blocks. From the top to the bottom, walls were girdled with open corridors, where usually sufferers walked, but now the space was empty. The Commission stood on a spacious terrace. Across from them, on the two opposite sides of the facility, there were two wooden chutes for body disposal.

Right there, under the terrace, was the most exciting part of the landscape. A huge pile of rotting human bodies, shining white bones and tattered black flesh and clothes. It was entirely the result of what contemporary society was doing. Above this pile was the most eerie thing anyone of them had ever seen. The holy members of the Commission forgot about the stench and the ugliness of this place and even came closer to the railing.

The Exalted Clarence turned his stone face towards them and boomed, 'Stay here and watch carefully!' He walked towards one of the terrace's gates. The members of the Commission were left on their own, scared and confused, in a dark place filled with hatred.

Carmer Danks whipped the backs of his porters, who were running as fast as they could down the corridors. They pushed past a group of sufferers, ran down a flight of stairs, then a corridor, a turn, a flight of stairs, a gate. Carmer leapt while they were running and sprawled face down in front of the startled Commission. The porters collapsed in exhaustion, taking deep breaths of the greasy air.

'Oh, Your Excellencies! What an honour, what an honour!'

He was crawling on his knees, trying to kiss their hands, but they all pulled away in disgust.

'What an honour it is for you to shine your light upon our dark torture facility.'

They ignored him and flocked to the railing again. Carmer also looked down.

'Oh, so you've seen it already!' No one paid any attention to him. 'This time, it grew very fast,' Carmer explained expertly. 'Usually it takes more time! I had reported it! Ah! There's the door, but... it's still shut...'

Right then, his eyes were drawn to the bottom of the Chamber, where the lowest open corridor, about a meter from the floor, produced a human shape in a parade robe. It was hard to tell from afar, but his face looked contorted in some unnatural, beastly grimace. It suddenly dawned on Carmer.

'But where is His Exalted Speakership?' he asked the Commission, who were still ignoring him completely. He stared into the small figure, writhing on the bottom of the Chamber.

'But-- Oh! But--' he was at a loss. 'Aah, but—How?' he stuttered and gave up. He lowered his eyes, like everyone else.

There, it seemed that Clarence was talking to himself. From the terrace, they could only make out inarticulate muttering. He moved in a strange way, as if wanting to walk forward, but then giving up and writhing in apparent pain. His groans grew louder and louder, until he fell on his knees and raised his arms towards the sky. Right then, the gate in the middle of the Chamber of the Rotting sprang open with a loud clatter. Everyone gasped, as beyond the door they saw... Green fields, full of flowers. Distant mountains with snowy peaks, a blue sky, butterflies, happiness...

'I told you,' Carmer said, teary-eyed. 'Heaven.'

Carmer's porters, a few guards and torturers had snuck onto the terrace and were also staring down.

Then, Clarence rose to his feet and, still writhing, started to climb up the heap of bodies. Some of the witnesses vomited. The huge gate slowly turned to face Clarence. He was climbing with feverish, frantic moves and muffled grunts. The gate was expecting him.

At some point midway, he slipped and fell face down. Everyone vomited. Even Carmer Danks.

Clarence struggled back up. The gate to Heaven awaited him.

At last, he reached it. He stood facing it for a short moment, and then he took a step...

The moment he stepped into the door, something eerie and terrifying happened. Heaven sharply changed into Hell! A bloody, throbbing Hell, torn up by screams. The gate shut abruptly and faded into the grey vortex.

Everyone on the terrace leaned over the railing. The vortex grew stronger. Bolts of lightning crackled, and there was a rumble and a dry clanging, as if from chains. Something was happening in the middle of the vortex. Something voracious, mindless, and ugly. A blood-curdling scream rose above the rumble. The vision burst into red, then subsided, and faded away. The smoke was gone, the static, the lightning bolts and the light wind were gone. The silence of the Chamber returned, highlighting the Chamber's typical ugliness as well. One body, torn asunder and sucked dry, was the only evidence that something had happened here. A body, just like all the rest, the only difference - its tattered parade robe.

Two people walked in the Central Temple's summer garden. The sun peeked lazily through the clouds and the odd bird chirped now and then.

'Your measures against the dark sects were quite effective, Your Speakership. Burning their priests at the stake was a very reasonable solution. According to the most recent reports, everything is calm now.'

'My solutions are always the right ones, Dontius,' Marcantius smiled.

Dontius also smiled with content. In just five months, he had risen to Master Preacher and Head of the Holy Servants.

'But what shall we do about the barbarians on our western border?' he asked.

'We are holy men, Dontius, we do not occupy ourselves with war. Let the Commission handle that. How goes the construction of the new Chamber? It's been a few days since I last checked.'

'Oh, it's going great, Your Speakership. The foundations are already there. It will be gorgeous. Much bigger and more modern than the previous one! By the way, a request came in from Head Torturer Carmer Danks. He

reports that too much material has accumulated, since you shut down the old Chamber. He asks if he can use it, until the new one is finished."

'No, definitely not,' Marcantius snapped. 'People must forget that place even existed. It is cursed!'

He paused, before adding, 'Are you sure that no information was leaked about what happened five months ago?'

'Oh, but of course, Your Speakership! Your measures were very efficient. Spies report that everything is calm in the city.'

'Good,' he paused. 'Double the construction efforts for the new Chamber.'

'Of course,' Dontius confirmed.

They kept on walking for a while, when suddenly Marcantius stopped in his tracks and squeezed his temples with his hands.

'Ooh!' he groaned.

'Are you alright, Your Holiness? What's the matter?'

He was breathing heavily. He stood like that for half a minute, then relaxed.

'It's nothing, just a dizzy spell,' he said and rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. 'Must be the lunch.'

'Just a dizzy spell...'

The End