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Also by Ankit Choudhury

The Chronicles Consummate

A Ballad of Chaos

A Son of Night and Chaos
A Son of Light and Lies
A Farmer of Perdition
A Reaper of Flame and Ruin
A Harbinger of Dawn and Order

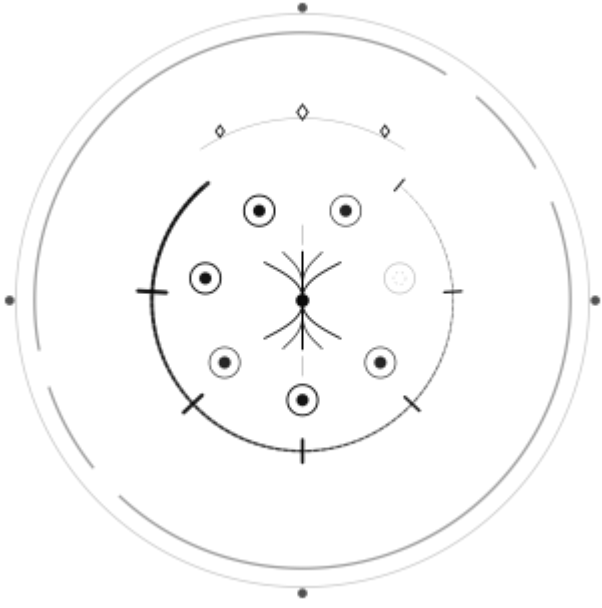
The human echo

A Lament of Dawn

A standalone version of Harbinger of Dawn and Order

THE FIRST LIE

THE JOURNAL OF LADY DEATH



ANKIT CHOUDHURY

THE FIRST LIE: The Journal of Lady Death

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A prelude to A Ballad of Chaos.

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For my friends, and to the shadows of my past —
Who opened my eyes to greater realms, and taught me to
question the seen and seek the unseen

A god does not win wars.
A god arranges them.

Chapter 1: The Past (Moris)

The Last Generation

Age unnumbered. Three seats bearing. Four seats cold.
Drift within tolerance. It is not within tolerance.

— the Register of Turns, ring three

I keep these notes because my brothers will not.

Oris makes things, and calls the making an explanation. Voris weighs things, and calls the weighing a verdict. Neither of them writes anything down, because both of them believe that what is true will go on being true without assistance. I have never had that comfort. My office is endings, and an ending is the only event in existence that cannot be revisited, or checked, or

asked to happen again more slowly for a second observer. So, I write it down. If I am wrong, I would like the wrongness kept.

I write plainly, for the same reason. An ornamented record is a record with places to hide things in. I have never had a use for one.

Begin with the slab, because everything begins with the slab.

It stands ten feet, black diamond, polished until it holds your face badly. Across it runs a tree of glyphs inlaid in ruby, in no language any of us speaks. We have never settled whether that is because the language is older than speech, or because it was never meant to be read by anything that would need to.

At the crown of the tree are three names in iridescent crystal.

Fate. Eternity. Infinity.

I am obliged to record that these are my parents, and to record also that I have no memory of being made by them, no memory of being small, and no

memory of a time before I had an office. None of us does. We were not raised. We were staffed.

Beneath them, seven names in sapphire.

Salvation. Calamity. Love. Creation. War. Destruction. Judgment.

They are cut, not written. Nobody awarded them and nobody can amend them. They were there before us, in that stone, by a hand that left no signature and no shavings, and they will be there after us. An emerald line runs left to right beneath them and thickens as it goes, so that Salvation is the smallest word on the slab and Judgment the largest, and we have argued for an age about whether that is a hierarchy or a warning and have got nowhere.

At the base are seven sockets, hollow, waiting.

Three of them were warm when we found them.

I want that word to stay exactly where I have put it. Not waiting. Not ordained. Not prepared for us by a loving hand. Warm — the way a chair is warm when someone has just stood up from it.

Oris took Creation. Voris took Judgment. I took Destruction, and everything that walks calls me Death, and I have never corrected any of them, because the difference between the two is a matter of tense and I am not sentimental about tense.

We have never learned who stood up.

✦✦✦

Three realms, while I am setting down the furniture.

The Blue is Creation, and Oris governs it, and it is what anybody means when they say the universe. It is shaped like a disc turned once into itself, so that the end of it is the beginning of it and there is therefore no end at all. Sempiternal. I have never liked the word and I have never found a better one.

The Red is the Edge of Creation. It is everything the Blue is not. Every instrument we own reports it as void, and I have entered that word in nine volumes without once having gone to look.

The Green is not a place, and I am obliged to say so plainly because the other two are. The Green is

me. I run through the veins of the Blue and I seep into the depths of the Red, and all things that pass from either of them unto me cease to exist. That is not a boast. It is a definition. It is the entire content of what I am.

Three realms, and the third of them is a person, and in all this time nobody has found that strange except the person.

✦✦✦

That is the fact underneath every other fact, and I set it down plainly because my brothers have both found ways to stop saying it out loud.

There were Ancients before us. The offices are older than the occupants; the seats predate the sitting. Somewhere behind us there is a generation that wore these same seven names, and behind them another, and the Register of Turns goes back further than the Register of Turns can account for, which is a sentence I have read a hundred times and still cannot get to lie flat.

Voris asked first. He always asks first, and he asks the way an auditor asks — not because he wants to know the answer but because he wants it entered that he was the one who wanted to know. "If the seats are older than us, where did the last ones go?"

Oris said they completed their cycle.

Voris said that was not an answer, it was a euphemism wearing an answer's coat.

I said nothing, because I already knew. I am the office of endings. If a generation of Ancients had ended, in any sense of the word that I administer, I would have been the one to do it, and I would remember doing it, and I do not. So they did not end. They were removed by something that is not me.

There is a great deal of comfort available in this existence and I have never once been able to locate any of it.

✦✦✦

We agreed a thing then, the three of us, and it is the only thing the three of us have ever agreed

without argument, and I record it here in the words we used because I want it kept in the words we used.

We will be the last.

Not the last to exist. The last to sit. Whatever the wheel is for, whatever it has been grinding these seats through since before there was a register to lie about it, it stops with us. We will not be a link. There will be no generation after ours to inherit a warm chair and ask the obvious question and receive a euphemism.

Voris named us for it.

The Last Generation.

He meant it as an oath. I have noticed lately that Oris has begun to use it as a description, and I do not yet know what to make of that, so I am writing it down.

Voris also took the occasion to weigh me, because he cannot let an occasion pass unweighed. He said that of the three of us I would find the oath easiest to keep, since an office that only ends things has

never once had to be right about anything, and has therefore never learned what it costs to be wrong.

I have entered it here in his words so that I do not have to carry it in mine.

✦✦✦

The plan is Oris's and I will give him his due: it is elegant, and it is the first idea any of us has had that is not simply a louder version of *push harder*.

Kālachákra, the wheel of time, turns because it is complete. Seven rings, seven teeth, seven gems seated and bearing load. A complete cycle is a cycle that can *repeat*, and repetition is the whole of the cruelty — the same age, the same fall, the same grief unfolding again under a new set of names to a new set of beings who believe they are the first ones to feel it.

So: do not attack the wheel. Starve it.

Crown three. Leave four cold. A wheel denied four of its seven teeth cannot turn true, and a cycle that cannot complete cannot repeat, and a mechanism that cannot repeat is forced to improvise. Every

revolution stumbles into a shape it has not held before. A new history with every pass. Not fate — *weather*.

Weather can be survived. Fate cannot.

I asked him what happens to the four.

He said, "Nothing happens to the four. They are names on a rock."

I wrote that down. I am writing it down again.

✦✦✦

For the record, since I am the record: I did not object.

I want that clear before any of the rest of this, because there is going to be a great deal of the rest of this. I read the plan. I found no flaw in it. I put my own seat into an experiment designed by my brother and I did it with my eyes open and my hand steady, and if the accounting ever comes to be done, mine is not a clean column.

Voris asked one question before he agreed, and I am entering it because I have come to think he had

already worked out the answer and wanted witnesses to the asking.

He said, "And if it does not work — what do we do with that?"

Oris laughed and said that was a very Judgment thing to ask.

He did not answer it. Voris did not press him either. He simply left the question sitting in a room where two other people could see it, which is what he does instead of arguing, and which I have never once found honest.

Chapter 2: The Present

The Account

To share without consent is not generosity. It is the first theft.
— from the Council of Eden, recovered transcript

The wheel had stopped screaming about an age ago and Oris still had not gone to look at it.

He sat instead at the low table he had made for himself in a place that did not have a name yet, and he wrote. Not on the slab. On the ordinary surfaces a maker keeps for working — the ones you can correct.

He had never written anything down in his existence, and had said so, often, and had meant it as a principle rather than a habit: what is true goes

on being true without assistance, and a record is the thing you start keeping on the day you stop believing that. He did not connect the two facts. He had spent the previous age proving, with his own hands, on the largest object there is, that a thing which is true can be made to stop being true if you push it hard enough — and then he had come here and sat down and reached for something to write on, and did not once ask himself why.

The cycle endures, regardless of our losses.

He read it back. It was true. Every word of it was true, which was the property he needed, and it was also the first sentence he had ever written whose truth was doing a job that its meaning was not. He set it aside without deciding anything about it and started again.

We saw our error. When we saw it, it was too late.

Better. *We* was doing a great deal of work in that one, and it was work he could stand behind: there had been three of them, the error had been theirs, and by the time it was legible the wheel had already

been given its shove. All true. He read it twice more for the pleasure of how little of it could be disputed.

Then he wrote the third sentence, and stopped, because the third sentence was where the account either held or came apart, and he already knew which word it wanted.

Outside, behind him, some distance below the level at which he was working, a great deal of history he had not written was arranging itself into place. He could feel it the way you feel a room being tidied by someone else. He did not turn round.

✦✦✦

The difficulty was not that anyone would accuse him. There was nobody to accuse him. His sister administered endings and had no jurisdiction over statements; his brother administered judgment and had just spent everything he had proving he could not administer it on Oris.

The difficulty was that a record which nobody could check was worthless, and a record which somebody could check would be checked.

So it would have to be a record that invited checking and survived it. Every verifiable part verifiable. Every unverifiable part small, and dull, and placed where a reader's attention would already be moving past it. He understood this the way he understood everything he had ever built: completely, immediately, and without any sense that understanding it was unusual.

He wrote: *Voris rebelled.*

He looked at it for a long time.

It was true, and it was true in the narrowest possible way, which he knew and which was the point. Voris had rebelled *against him*. Not against the design, not against what was supposed to happen — nobody in existence knew what was supposed to happen, Oris least of all, and that was the fact the sentence was built to walk the reader past. His brother had gone somewhere he could not follow and could not name, and had done it in

the course of trying to stop something. Every word of the sentence was accurate. It contained no falsehood whatsoever.

It simply began at the wrong moment. That was all. It began after.

He said the next word out loud, once, to hear what it did to the air.

"Heretic."

It was a good word. It was a very good word.

It answered a question by making the question sound badly asked, which is the most a word can be expected to do, and it would still be doing it long after everyone who had been present had stopped being anyone at all.

He wrote it down. Then he went to see what the wheel had made of him

Chapter 3: The Past (Moris)

The Null Age

Ring two reports a load on a socket that is not bearing.
Ring two is instructed to report again.
Ring two reports the same.
— the Register of Turns, tooth five

The first thing I must set down about the null age is that it worked.

I have read this entry back many times and I keep wanting to soften that sentence, and I am not going to, because softening it would be a lie of exactly the kind I am about to spend the rest of this volume complaining about. It worked. For a long time it worked beautifully, and we were happy, and I would like whoever reads this to understand that

we were happy, because otherwise none of what we did next will make any sense at all.

Three seats bearing. Creation, Judgment, Destruction. Four sockets cold and dark and, as Oris had promised, entirely inert.

And the wheel *stumbled*.

You have to have watched a complete cycle to understand what a gift that was. A complete turn is a recital. You can feel the beats coming. You know which age is arriving because you have felt its weight in the grooves an age before it lands, and you know what it will cost, and you know that knowing will not buy you a single thing. To stand on a wheel that has lost its footing — that hesitates, and gropes, and produces an age nobody has ever lived — I have no words for it that are not embarrassing. Voris wept. Oris did not, but he stood very still for a long time with his hand flat on a ring, the way you stand with your hand on something breathing.

Ages passed that had never been. I administered endings that were genuinely new. Do you know what it is to end something for the first time?

We had tricked Fate. My father, and we had tricked him, and for a while there was no sentence any of us could complete without laughing.

✦✦✦

Here is where it turned, and it turned so slowly that I want the dates I do not have.

Calamity came first.

Nothing crowned it. Nothing seated it. The socket stayed cold — I went and put my hand into it myself, more than once, and it was cold, and it was empty, and there was nothing in it but the shape of a nothing that fit. And an age drowned anyway. Not by our design and not by anyone's decree. Simply: calamity, arriving on schedule, wearing no crown, answering to no throne, doing precisely what the seat would have done if the seat had been filled.

I recorded it as an anomaly. That is the word I used. I would like to be judged for that word by someone who has never used it.

War came next, and it did not even have the decency to be ambiguous. Whole orders of being took up against each other for reasons that could not be traced to any hand, in an age with no War-seat, no War-crown, no Ancient of War in existence to want it. It happened the way weather happens. Voris went looking for a cause with the full apparatus of Judgment behind him and came back with nothing, which in his entire existence had never happened before, and he was frightened in a way I had not seen and have not seen since.

Then Love.

Love was the worst of the three, because Love did not arrive. It seeped. It got into oaths. Into the terms of agreements between beings who had no throne of Love to appeal to and no vocabulary for it. It ruined them gently, one after another, from the inside, the way damp ruins a wall.

No gem fuelled it. Nothing was feeding it. It gnawed at every oath in creation and there was nothing anywhere to gnaw with.

Three cold seats. Three offices discharging themselves with nobody in the chair.

✦✦✦

I will put down what that meant, in the plainest form I can manage, because I have watched both my brothers construct elaborate reasons not to put it down at all.

We did not withhold those three forces. We only withheld their governors.

The seats were never the source of anything. They were the place where a thing that already existed could be *held* — reasoned with, delayed, bargained against, made to explain itself. Crown Calamity and calamity has a face you can address. Leave it cold and calamity still comes, and it comes without a face, and there is nobody to petition.

We had not diminished the cycle. We had removed its administration and left the cruelty running unattended.

Voris said it out loud before I did. He said, "We did not break the wheel, we proved it." And Oris struck the floor with his palm hard enough to make the diamond ripple like water, which is the only time in the entire age I saw him lose hold of himself, and I did not understand it then.

I understand it now. Voris had not said "we failed." He had said "we have a result."

✦✦✦

Before I leave the null age there is an entry I have put off making, because I cannot decide whether it is an observation or a complaint.

I do not know what they were.

The orders of being that went to war. The ones whose oaths Love got into. The ones I have ended, in their enormous numbers, correctly and on schedule, in every age I have administered. I can give you the hour and the manner and whether it

was clean, because that part is mine and I keep it faultlessly. What the thing *was*, before it was a thing I ended, is not in my record. I have looked. I do not think it ever was.

I used to take that for the discipline of the office. Oris must look at a thing to make it and Voris must look at a thing to weigh it. I have never once had to look at anything. I only have to arrive.

✦✦✦

And there is one more thing, and it is mine, and neither of them ever took it seriously.

The first seat never did anything.

Calamity discharged. War discharged. Love discharged. Salvation, the smallest word on the slab and the first in the line, produced nothing at all.

Not once. Not in any age of the null. Three ungoverned offices found their way into the world without their chairs, and rescue — the one of the four that anybody would have asked for — never

came, and was never in the socket, and was not out in the world unattended either.

I have put my hand in that socket more times than I have recorded here.

It is not cold in the way the other three were cold. That is the only way I know how to write it, and I am aware it is not a measurement. Calamity's socket was cold the way an empty cup is empty. This one is cold the way a room is quiet when somebody in it has decided not to speak.

I have raised it twice. Oris said an absence cannot be evidence. Voris said he would consider it, and did, and came back and said that he could find no wrong in the seat, which is not the same as saying there is nothing in it, and he knew that when he said it, and he said it anyway.

I am the office of endings. I have spent my entire existence being the last thing a great many beings ever meet, and I am not easily unsettled by an absence, and I am going to write the true sentence now and stop for today.

Four seats were left empty.

Something sat in one of them.

Chapter 4: The Present

Origin

Fate is not a river. It is a loom. We are told we are the weavers. We are the thread.

— inscription on the Slab of Ancients

Oris did not make Origin. He has been given the credit for it ever since and he has never once corrected anybody, and the correction is this: the leap made it. The wheel split, and a branch came out of the split the way bone comes out of a break, and it was burning, and there was no law in it at all.

The leap had torn something. Not metaphorically: there was a place where the loom's pattern ran out and a place where it resumed, and between them a width of nothing that the fabric was trying to close

by pulling on itself from both sides. Left alone it would have closed. It would have closed the way a wound closes when nobody attends it, dragging everything either side of it out of true forever.

What he did was furnish it. It had arrived raw and it had arrived lying across the tear, and he went into it and made it into an instrument, and that is the work he afterwards allowed to be called the building of a world.

He made it crystalline because crystal does not creep. He made its order absolute and its law prior to its inhabitants, so that nothing in it would ever have to be decided, because a decision is a place where a thing could have gone another way, and a place where a thing could have gone another way is a place where somebody can stand and ask why it went this way. He made it perfect in the exact sense that a splint is perfect: it did one thing, it did it without variance, and it would do it until it was removed.

And he made it incapable of growth. That was the part he would be praised for, later, by beings who believed they were describing his ambition.

A thing that grows drifts. A thing that drifts reveals the seam.

✦✦✦

He was setting the last of the law when he understood that the tidying behind him had not stopped.

It had not been tidying. He turned round properly for the first time since the wheel had jumped, and he looked down the length of the loom at what was holding his tear closed, and it was not his branch doing it. His branch was carrying the load. Something else entirely had gone into the gap.

There were people in it.

Not made. He would have known if they were made; making was the one thing in existence he could not mistake, the way you cannot mistake your own handwriting. These had not been made. They had been *inferred* — the loom reading what a

torn stretch of pattern must have contained, and then weaving it in at full weight, because a thread that is woven holds and a thread that is only intended does not.

None of it had come through yet. It sat in the pattern the way a sentence sits in a sealed letter — finished, in force, and nobody's news. He could read it because he could read the loom. Nothing living below him could read anything at all.

He went in and stood among them for a while.

They had grandmothers. That was the detail he could not get past, and he stood in a village that was four heartbeats old and turned it over and could not put it down. They had grandmothers, and the grandmothers had died, and the graves were there with the earth settled on them, and the ones still living came to the graves and were *grieving*. Correctly. In every particular. For women who had never drawn a breath, because there had been no breath to draw, because there had been no time in which to draw it — and the grief was not a copy of

grief. He checked. He was the Creator and he checked, and the grief went all the way down.

The loom had not patched the tear with matter. It had patched it with lives, because lives were what the missing stretch of pattern had been made of, and it had not asked him, and it had not needed to.

He stood there a long time.

Then he went back up to his crystalline unfinished branch and thought, with the part of himself that had never once failed him and had never once been kind:

They will do.

If they hold the seam, they can hold the seam. And nobody audits a thing that is grieving.

He did not stay to watch it come through. It would come through; the loom finishes what it begins. He had checked the parts of it that could be checked — the grief, the graves, the settled earth — and they had held, and they were small and dull and had not asked for his attention, and that had always

been enough for him. A thing verified in its particulars is a thing you can stop looking at.

He went back to setting the law. Somewhere between one clause and the next he stopped thinking of it as something that was going to happen and began thinking of it as something that had.

And he kept one thing out of that day, which he did not write down and did not need to.

A loom does not leave a hole. Tear the pattern and it will find something to put in the gap, and whatever it puts there will arrive already old, and nothing living inside the repair will ever be able to see the seam — not because the seam is hidden, but because the thing that would notice it has been rewoven too. He filed that the way he filed everything: completely, and without once asking himself why he was keeping it.

Chapter 5: The Past (Moris)

The Leap

A result you cannot publish is not a result.
It is a preference.
— Voris, in the null age, before he was called anything else

Three people in a room with a number. I have come to think that is the most dangerous arrangement that has ever existed, and I include in that every war I have ever closed.

The number was not in dispute. That is the part nobody ever believes when I set it down. We did not argue about the result. All three of us had read the same registers, and all three of us agreed on what they said: the null age had not weakened the cycle, it had exposed it. Deny the wheel four of its

seven and they discharge themselves anyway, ungoverned, unpetitionable, worse. We had proved that the cruelty is not administrative. It is structural. It does not need us.

We agreed on that completely. Then we discovered that agreeing on a result is not the same as agreeing on what a result is *for*, and the three of us came apart along that seam like something that had been scored in advance.

✦✦✦

Voris wanted it recorded.

Not announced — he was not a fool and there was nobody to announce it to. Recorded. Entered. Written into the Register of Turns in a hand that a later generation could find, so that whoever inherited the warm chairs after us would inherit this as well: *it has been tried, this is what it cost, do not spend an age learning it again.*

He said, and I am copying it exactly because he will certainly claim later that he said it better, "A result

you cannot publish is not a result. It is a preference."

It is a good sentence. He knows it is a good sentence. He had it ready — which means he had known what the result was going to be before the result came in, and had spent the interval composing.

Oris wanted to run it again.

He had four variations ready and he had had them ready, I think, for some time. Crown four and leave three. Crown three but different three. Crown all seven and stagger the seating. He laid them out with that terrible patience of his and every one of them was ingenious and every one of them was the same idea wearing a different coat, and when Voris said so, Oris said that was a very Judgment thing to say, which is what he says when he has been hit.

And I wanted to close the age.

I need to explain what that is, because both my brothers spent the argument pretending they did

not understand it and I do not believe either of them for a moment.

I do not have an opinion that carries weight. I cannot publish. I cannot rule. That is why I write. I hold one instrument and it does one thing: I can end a run. And when a run is ended — properly, by the office, in sequence — it is *entered*. That is not a ceremony. The entry is the mechanism. An age that I close becomes an age that happened, fixed, legible, in the Register, with everything in it, including what it was for and what it proved.

So I could not publish the result. But I could make the age that produced it into a fact.

That is the whole of my authority and it had never once mattered before that afternoon.

✦✦✦

Oris understood it before Voris did. I want that on the record too, because it is the last thing I ever admired about him.

He went very quiet, and then he asked me a question, and I have never answered it.

He said, "What do you think a young thing feels, reading in the first pages of the Register that the world has been tested and cannot be beaten?"

I said that it would feel what is true.

He said, "It will feel nothing. That is the point. It will not try. Nobody will try, ever again, and a thing that nobody tries is a thing that has become true by our arrangement rather than by its own nature. You will not be publishing a fact. You will be manufacturing one."

And then, and this is the sentence I have been unable to put down — "You administer endings. I am asking you not to administer this one, because you cannot see what you would be ending."

He was not lying. I want that entered. He believed every word, and I could not find the flaw in it then and I cannot find it now, and it is the single most persuasive thing anybody has ever said to me.

Voris said, "He is asking you to lie for hope."

Oris said, "Yes. And you are asking her to tell the truth for nothing."

✦✦✦

I have tried to write the next part six times and every version is too fast, because it was too fast.

He did not announce it. He crossed the chamber, put both hands into the rings, and forced the wheel forward.

The Kālachákra does not have a speed. It has a *rate*, the way a heart has a rate. Every ring is geared to every other. The whole vast grinding patience of it is the one thing in existence that no office governs.

He took hold of it and pushed.

It went.

The rings blurred. Seven became one — a single disc of fire with no separation in it, no teeth, no grooves, nothing to stand on — and ages went past us the way rain goes past a window. I felt endings. Billions of them. Whole orders of being beginning and completing and closing inside a single revolution, and every one of them mine to administer, and every one of them administered

without me, because there was no time in which to reach them.

That is what I cannot forgive and it is not the part anyone would expect. He did not kill anything. He denied a great many things their ending. There is no register entry for a life that was not concluded, only skipped.

Voris went for him. Not for the wheel — for him. I am entering that precisely, because it is the only occasion in his existence on which Judgment declined to make its case first. He crossed the chamber and took our brother off his feet and the two of them went into the base of the rings hard enough that the diamond rang like struck glass, and for a moment, and I am going to write this because it is true and because it is not to my credit, for a moment I thought Voris would win, and I did not move to help either of them.

Oris did not fight back.

That is the part I have never managed to file. He lay under his brother with his hands still in the rings and he did not take them out, and the wheel

went on gathering underneath the both of them, and Voris worked it out before I did: that stopping the man had stopped being the same thing as stopping the machine, and had probably never been the same thing, and that he had spent the only moment available to him on the wrong one.

He said one thing in the whole of it, and he did not say it to Oris. He turned his head on the diamond and said it to me.

"Moris. You can see it. Say that you can see it."

I could see it.

I have had nine volumes and a great deal of time and I have never once managed to enter why I did not answer him. The best I have is this: I am the office of endings, and in the whole of my existence nobody had ever asked me to be a witness to anything, and I did not know that a witness has to speak while the thing is still happening or stop being one.

So he let go of him and went for the wheel instead. He is heavier than me and he was faster than me

and he put himself against the rings with the entire weight of his office behind it and it did not slow by any amount that I could measure. I got a hand on a tooth as it came round. It took the hand off at the wrist and gave it back three ages later. I am aware that sentence makes no sense. It is the most accurate thing in this entry.

His ribs went somewhere in the middle of it. I heard them go, one and then several, and he did not stop, and he was still going when the rings stopped — and the rings did not stop because of him, or because of me, or because of anything that either of us will ever be able to enter as a cause.

There is a gap in this entry and I am going to mark it rather than fill it. Between the tooth taking my hand and what comes next I have nothing. Not darkness. Nothing, the way a page has nothing on it. I have put it down to the wheel, because an office that closes runs was never built to be inside one, and I am aware that putting a thing down to something is not the same as knowing what it was. I am marking it because a record that quietly closes over its own holes has begun lying to the one person it was kept for.

Then it lurched. It skipped, the way a foot skips on a stair, and when it settled something new was burning at the middle of it that had not been there before.

Voris said the word first. He said it the way you name a wound.

"Origin."

✦✦✦

We lay on the diamond for a long time afterward, the two of us, in a chamber where the rings were ticking again as though nothing had happened, and I will set down the one exchange because it is the last honest conversation I had with anybody.

Voris said, "Do you still mean to close it?"

I said yes.

He said, "He knows that."

I said I was aware.

And Voris — Judgment, my brother, and I am aware that I have not written a kind word about

him in nine volumes — lay there with his ribs broken in a pattern I could read from where I was, and said:

"Then close it. I will stand behind you. Somebody has to enter what he did, and the only instrument in existence that can enter anything is you."

I have thought about that sentence more than any other in my existence.

Read it again. *The only instrument*. He did not say *the only one of us*. He said instrument. He lay on the diamond with his ribs in pieces and found the breath to set me where I would be useful, and I am the office of endings, and I know perfectly well what it is to be picked up.

I said I would close the age.

I did not say it for him.

Chapter 6: The Present

The Instruments

Each Ancient must be correctly aligned to their nature, and not to their deeds.

— Oris the Creator, on the seating of the seven

Oris needed witnesses, and there were none, so he made some.

That is the plainest way to put it and it is not how he put it to himself. What he put to himself was that the seam needed load spread across more than one branch; that a realm with law but no citizens is a splint with nothing splinted; that the interpolated ones below were holding the tear but could not be relied on to hold it *forever*, being what they were. All of that was true. He was very good at true.

He carved seven tablets out of milky opal, each the size of a small shield, and he cut a name into each in shimmering starlight, and when he had finished he stood back and looked at seven names that had not existed a moment earlier and understood, without permitting himself to phrase it, that he had just broken the only oath he had ever taken.

We will be the last to sit.

There would now be a generation after theirs. He had made it himself, one tablet at a time, and he had made it for the express purpose of having somebody in the room the next time a question was asked.

He did not think of it as breaking the oath. He thought of it as the oath having been made by three people, two of whom had turned out to be unequal to it.

✦✦✦

Uriel. Zachariel. Michael. Gabriel. Raphael. Azrael. Lucifer.

He seated them in his mind before he seated them anywhere else, and the seating is the part that gives him away, because the whole shape of him is visible in one gesture.

Michael to Love. Gabriel to Creation. Raphael to War. Zachariel to Calamity. Uriel to Salvation — the seat that had produced nothing in the null age, given to the one he had decided would be gentlest, which is either the kindest thing in the list or the cruelest, and he never said which.

Azrael to Destruction.

Lucifer to Judgment.

He wrote those last two without pausing at either. Destruction was his sister's chair and Judgment was his brother's, and neither of them had vacated, and he assigned both to children of his own making before the argument in the chamber was an age cold. He did not experience this as a decision about his siblings. He experienced it as alignment to nature: the boy Azrael would have the temperament for endings, and the boy Lucifer would have the finest mind that had ever been

made, and Judgment is where you put the finest mind you have.

That is not a defense. It is worse than a defense. A man who plans his brother's replacement in sorrow is a man who has understood something. Oris understood nothing, because he had not classified it as a thing requiring understanding.

He had written *Gabriel, Creation* in the same hand and with the same absence of pause. It is the one seating on the tablet that cost him nothing. Destruction and Judgment were chairs he would not be sitting in. Creation was a chair he had no intention of leaving. He gave the boy the name and kept the office. The oath he had broken on behalf of his brother and his sister he did not, in any particular, break on his own.

✦✦✦

The memories were the last of it, and the smallest, and the one he would have called housekeeping.

He had nothing to do here, and that is the entry.

The loom would put the interpolated ones out into the world in its own time, and when it did it would not stop at the world. He had learned that at the tear. A loom covering a gap covers all of it, and it goes into anything that can hold a memory and lays the missing history down in there as well, so that the thing arrives already remembered, already old, already nobody's news.

His children would remember mortals. They would remember Eden as old. They would remember grandmothers they had never met, dying in an order that had never occurred, and the remembering would be perfectly real, because the grief underneath it was real, because the loom did not do things by halves.

He could have told them. It was available to him at no cost at any hour of any age and it would have taken one sentence: *what you are about to remember did not happen, and here is why it is there.*

He decided against it, and he did not experience deciding. A thing you have not said asks nothing of you afterwards. It does not have to be kept up,

or repeated, or defended, and it never once has to be looked at again, and it is the only kind of untruth in existence that costs its author nothing at all.

He made those two first, and the reason is the same reason he had not paused over either of them. Five of the seven were offices he had only ever watched from outside. Two he had lived beside. He knew what Judgment looked like in a room and what an ending looked like in a hand, because he had spent his existence being audited by one and outlasted by the other, and a nature that has been used on you is a nature you can build.

So Lucifer, first, because he had decided to make the finest one first and be done with the hardest part while his hand was steady. He gave the boy everything: precision, patience, an intolerance for a sentence that did not close, and the specific and irreplaceable gift of noticing when two things that should agree do not.

Then Azrael, who cost him nothing at all, because a temperament for endings had been settled an age before there was a boy to put it in, and the boy

opened his eyes with it already in him, and it fitted the way a thing fits when it has been cut to the hole.

Alignment to nature. He had written the nature, and he had copied it off the two it was written to replace.

He would spend the rest of existence being asked one question by the only creature he had ever built capable of asking it, and he would have no answer that was not a confession, and he had built that creature himself, on purpose, first, out of pride in his own work.

Chapter 7: Interlude (Moris)

The Stitch

The first thing we were ever told was that we were meant. No one has ever found who said it first.
— from the annals of Origin, compiler unknown

He was sitting on a wall that had been built four heartbeats ago by nobody.

I had come to end him. I want to be exact about this, because I have since heard it described as cruelty by somebody who was not there. He was not supposed to be. I am the office that attends to what is not supposed to be, the way a hem attends to a loose thread. I have closed ages. I have closed whole orders of being, gently, the way you shut a door in a house where someone is sleeping. I had

come down because the tear was full of things that had not been concluded and had not been begun either, and that is my jurisdiction and nobody else's, and I intended to do my work.

I put my hand on him and nothing happened.

I have no language for that and I have had a long time to find some. I had never met a refusal. Refusal is not a thing that exists in the direction I face. All things that pass from Blue and Red unto me cease to exist — that is not a boast, it is a definition, it is the entire content of what I am — and I put my hand on a man who was four heartbeats old and he went on being.

I want to record that I tried again on someone else, two fields over, an old woman with a bad hip. She ceased. Immediately, correctly, without incident.

So it was not me. It was him.

He was holding something up. Pull him and the tear opens.

✦✦✦

He looked up.

His face was worn by a weather that had never fallen. His hands were calloused by a plough that had never been forged. Somewhere behind him there was a grave with his mother in it, and his mother had never drawn breath, and he had wept at that grave.

The weeping had been real.

"Are you a god?" he said.

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

Wrong question, I thought. Ask me why you are.

And he did. He said it without any particular weight, the way you ask about weather, because he had no idea it was the first time it had ever been asked and he had no idea that the answer was standing in front of him with its hand still out.

I could have told him. I want that recorded, since I am the record. I could have said: my brother tore the sky trying to get the three of us out of a

machine that none of us built and none of us can find the builder of, and the machine repaired itself, and you are the repair. You have a mother because the seam required a mother. Your grief is genuine and it is structural. You are not a person. You are a stitch.

I looked at his hands.

"You were always meant to be," I said.

✦✦✦

It was the first lie ever told to your kind.

I told it. I would tell it again. I have never once been sorry and I have never once been anything else, and I am aware that both of those are true at the same time and I am not going to reconcile them for you.

I have had a long while to work out what I actually did there, and it is not what I thought at the time. I thought I was being kind to one man on a wall. What I was actually doing was handing an entire species its founding sentence. *You were meant*. Every faith your kind has ever built is a gloss on it. Every

one of them is downstream of a clerical decision taken by Death, in a field, out of embarrassment, because the alternative was to stand there and explain to a grieving man that his mother had been a structural necessity.

My brother removed a name and called it administration. I added a purpose that was not there and called it mercy.

I notice, writing that, that I have used his sentence construction.

✦✦✦

There is a cost and I am going to enter it, because an entry with no cost in it is an advertisement.

My office does not work the way it did.

I have tested it. I test it constantly. It closes what it should close, it enters what it should enter, the instrument is sound. But there is a hesitation in it now that was not there before, half a beat, every time, and it is not mechanical. I know exactly what it is. It is me checking whether the thing in front of me is holding something up.

I was the one office in existence that never had to ask a second question. I asked one, in a field, about a man on a wall, and I have not been able to stop.

I would like it noted that this is the correct outcome.

I would also like it noted that the office of endings now hesitates.

There is nothing in the Register that says what the wheel does with an office that hesitates.

There is nothing in it either about what an office is for. I have been an instrument my whole existence and it has never once been put to me that an instrument can decline.

I am not going to take that any further today.

Chapter 8: The Present

The Record

I have been here some while now. Nobody has come.
I have stopped believing that this is because they cannot find me.
— the Red Realm Chronicles, attributed to its first occupant

The chamber was empty, which was how Oris preferred to work, and on this occasion there was nothing in it for him to work on.

He had come to the slab intending to do something, and had arrived to find it already being done.

His brother had gone over the Edge. Not exiled — Voris had never in his existence waited to be told where to stand. He had taken himself out past the

last of the pattern, into the unlit width every instrument in creation reported as void, and he had done it with his ribs still in pieces, and he had done it, Oris was fairly certain, in order to stand somewhere a verdict could be written that nobody could reach in and amend.

That was the last act of Judgment as Judgment. It went and stood outside the record so that it could keep one.

And the loom began to close.

He felt it before he understood it, the way you feel a room being tidied by somebody else, and then he understood it completely, because he had watched it work once already and had kept what he saw. A loom does not leave a hole. Take a thread out of the weave and it will draw the neighboring threads across the gap and settle them there and make the closing retroactive, so that the finished cloth carries no memory of ever having been otherwise. It had done it below the tear with an entire species. It was doing it now with one man.

He stood in the chamber and watched his brother stop having been.

It was not violent. That was the part he had not expected. Nothing tore and nothing dimmed, and the sapphire letters of *Judgment* stayed exactly where they had been cut — because the stone was not the loom's work and never had been. The stone was older than the wheel. The hand that cut it had left no signature and no shavings, and whatever the loom could reach, it could not reach that. Seven names stayed on the slab. Seven sockets stayed under them.

Everything else went. The Register. The entries. The nine volumes in his sister's small clear hand. Every head in existence that had ever held the shape of a second brother — and they did not go the way a thing goes when it is destroyed. They went the way a thing goes when it turns out never to have been there.

✦✦✦

He had one thing available to him. It took him a moment to see what it was, and when he saw it he did not move.

The name.

A thing said aloud is a thing the loom has to work around. He had proved that himself, below the tear, in a field, on a wall built by nobody: a sentence spoken into a repair is a stake driven into it, and the repair closes around the stake and keeps the shape of it forever. Say *Voris* now — out loud, once, in a chamber with a stone in it the loom could not touch — and the closing would have to happen around a hole with a name in it, and somebody counting, one day, would find both.

He had the whole of the closing in which to say it. It was not a short time. He was never afterwards able to say how long it was, and not being able to say how long something took had not happened to him before and did not happen again.

He did not say it.

He did not decide not to say it either, and that is the charge, and there is nothing else in it. There was no moment in which he set his brother against his account and chose the account. He stood in a quiet room with his mouth shut while the only witness to what he had done was taken out of the world by a machine, and he experienced the whole of it as *waiting*.

✦✦✦

When it was over he read the slab.

Salvation. Calamity. Love. Creation. War. Destruction. Judgment.

Seven. Every one of them present, every one of them cut, exactly as they had been before there was anybody in existence able to read them. He looked at the last word for some while. It was a word now and only a word. It belonged to nothing, and it would go on belonging to nothing in front of anybody who ever came to that stone and thought to ask who was in it.

He considered, briefly and without much interest, what he would do if somebody asked.

Then he did the arithmetic he was better at than anybody who has ever existed: how many beings in the whole of creation would stand at this slab, and of those, how many would read all seven names, and of those, how many would try to put a face to each one, and of those, how many would trust the gap over their own memory.

The answer was one. She was the only other thing in existence older than the stone's authority over her, and she was not going to.

✦✦✦

Before he left the chamber he stood for a moment facing the other way, towards the border his own realm did not reach — the width of unlit nothing past the Edge that every instrument he owned reported as empty. He had given Origin its law and left the tear to the ones the loom had put there. Neither of those was a thing that could look into this.

Somebody was in there. He was now the only being in existence who knew it, and he would go on being the only one, and the knowledge would sit in him for the rest of his existence like a stone in a shoe that he would never once stop to take out.

He decided, as he would decide in every age afterwards, that a thing which cannot get out is a thing that has been dealt with.

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Then he went to find his sister.

He did not go to her with a story. He had learned in the chamber, an age earlier, that a story is a surface somebody can get a fingernail under, and that the strongest position available to him was to say almost nothing and let a stone do the talking. So he simply arranged to be present when she next came to enter something, and to be standing where she would have to read past him.

She read the slab. He watched her do it. He watched her read the whole top row, left to right,

the way she read everything, and reach the end of it, and stop.

He waited for her to ask him who held Judgment.

She said, "Seven seats bearing two. Nothing has changed since the last entry."

And then she made the entry, in her small clear hand, and closed the volume, and went out.

He stood in the chamber for a long while afterward. He had expected relief and what arrived instead was the specific, unfamiliar, entirely unwelcome discovery that he had just watched his sister lose a brother and not notice, and that he was the only being in existence who knew she had ever had one.

He found, to his considerable inconvenience, that he was going to have to get used to that.

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He went back to his table that night and wrote for a long time, and he told himself it was for the ones coming after.

It was not. His sister's volumes had stopped being a record of anything — he had stood in a room and let them be revised, and they now agreed with each other perfectly, which is the one property a record can have that proves nothing at all. There was exactly one account left in existence that the loom had not been able to reach, because it was in his own hand, on ordinary surfaces, in a place that did not have a name yet.

Voris rebelled. He had written it an age ago and it had been true then, in the narrowest possible way, and he had been rather pleased with how narrow.

It was now the only place in creation where the name existed at all.

Chapter 9: The Present (Moris)

We Are Six

Age unnumbered. Seven seats bearing two.
The Register declines to number this age.
— the Register of Turns, final legible entry, ring three

Undated. I have stopped dating them. The rate is not reliable any more and a date I cannot verify is worse than none.

I went to the slab and counted.

Seven names. Seven sockets. Two of them bearing.

I am the Ancient of endings. I have held my office since before Origin had a name to be a wound in. Every one of those numbers is correct, and I have

never in my existence been so frightened by a set of correct numbers.

Plainly, then, in case this volume is read by someone who is not me.

There are seven names cut into that stone and I can put a face to six of them. Creation is my brother. Destruction is me. Salvation, Calamity, Love and War are four cold seats I have spent nine volumes writing about, and I know exactly what has ever been in them, which is nothing.

And there is Judgment.

Judgment is the largest word on the slab. The emerald line runs the whole width of the stone and stops there because there is nowhere further to run. It is cut as deep as my own, by the same hand, in the same age, and I cannot tell you who has ever sat in it. Not now. Not in the null age. Not in any age I have administered, and I have administered all of them.

I have gone back through nine volumes of my own entries in my own hand. Every one of them agrees

with every other, and not one of them treats this as a difficulty. *We are six.* I have written that sentence, unprompted, in ages I remember perfectly well, and I never once stopped to ask why a stone with seven names on it was describing six people.

A consistent record is what an intact memory looks like. It is also what a good edit looks like. I am aware of that. I am writing it down so that it is on the page and not in my head.

Consider the alternative. The alternative is that I am wrong. That something has been taken out of me, and out of nine volumes in my own hand, and out of the Register — cleanly, with no crossing-out anywhere — and that I have gone on writing in perfect confidence ever since.

I have tested myself. The record is consistent. Every entry agrees with every other entry. There is no seam and there is no scar and there is nowhere a correction could have been made.

But I cannot name a seventh.

That is the whole of it. I have been through every office, every age, every ending I have ever administered. There is no seventh anywhere. And a seat with nobody in it, and no memory of anybody ever having been in it, is not a vacancy. It is a flaw in the cutting.

So: a name cut for something that never came. The stone is old. Older than us. Older, I suspect, than whatever it was made to hold.

I do not believe this. I am entering it because it is what the evidence permits, and I am not entitled to a better answer than the evidence permits.

✦✦✦

Two more entries. Then I am going to do something.

The first. There are sentences in my own volumes that nobody said.

I found the first of them looking for something else. *A result you cannot publish is not a result. It is a preference.* In my hand. In the null age. No speaker.

Then more. *A euphemism wearing an answer's coat. We did not break the wheel, we proved it.* And one I have read a great many times since, which I entered without comment because I did not want to carry it: *an office that only ends things has never once had to be right about anything, and has therefore never learned what it costs to be wrong.*

Somebody said that to me. To my face. I wrote it down within the hour, because I write everything down, and I cannot tell you who it was, or what they were, or whether I liked them.

They were right, whoever they were. That is the part I want on the page. Not the arithmetic — the verdict. I am the office of endings and I have never in my existence had to be right about anything, and I am finding out this age what it costs.

I would like to meet them. I have never wanted to meet anybody.

The second. Salvation's socket. The one I have put my hand in more times than I have recorded.

It is not the same kind of empty as the others. I wrote the reason down an age ago and I have not improved on it since: *Calamity's socket was cold the way an empty cup is empty. This one is cold the way a room is quiet when somebody in it has decided not to speak.*

That one I remember writing.

I am not going to write down what I think is in it. I have made a career of endings, and I know the difference between a thing you have not identified and a thing you have identified and would rather not name.

That is the second lie in this volume. It is mine.

✦✦✦

Here is what I am going to do, and here is why.

I have kept these notes for myself, which I now see was the error. Not a small error — the error. A record I hold is a record that can be reached, and I have just proved, in nine volumes and my own handwriting, that I am a thing that can be edited without noticing. Every safeguard I built into this account assumed that the danger was my being

wrong. The danger was never my being wrong. The danger was my being revised, and then going on writing in perfect confidence in the same clear hand.

So I am beginning this again, and this time for a stranger.

I am going to put a name on the front of it, and it will not be mine. A stranger will not know Moris. Everything that walks calls me Death and I have never once corrected them, and this is the first occasion in my existence on which that has been of any use.

And I am going to write it differently. Short. Flat. Measurements, and no inference.

I said at the start of this volume that an ornamented record is a record with places to hide things in. I did not think then that I would be hiding them from myself. Take the ornament out and an alteration has nowhere to sit but in the open, where the next reader can count it.

I am aware of what that will cost. There will be nothing of me in it. That is the point of it.

If it is ever read, it will be read in the annals of Perdition, which is a poor library and the only one I am likely to reach. I do not expect it to be read soon. I expect it to be read by someone who has already lost something and cannot work out what, because that is who goes looking in a place like that.

Whoever you are: I am not a warning. I am a measurement.

Read all seven names. Then put a face to each one. Do not trust your memory over the stone — the stone is the one thing in existence that cannot be reached, and your memory is the part of you that is easiest to reach.

Do not go looking for the one you cannot place. There is nothing to find. What is findable is the *shape* of the absence, and the shape is enough to convict.

And if somebody ever hands you a name for it — a stranger, in a place you have not been — write it down, because you should write everything down. Then enter this underneath it. A name that is handed to you is a label somebody else is holding out. It is not a memory. I have nothing to check one against, and neither will you, and we will both write it down anyway.

✦✦✦

I do not know what begins when this is found.

I know what it will be made of. A seat with a name cut into it and nobody behind the name. A species that is a repair, walking about, grieving accurately for people who were never born. A wheel that skipped a note and then wrote a whole world into the gap to cover the sound of it, and a brother who insists the world is the point and the gap was the price.

There is only one honest word for a thing built that way, and the word is not order.

What begins when this is found will be *a ballad of chaos*.

I am going into the Red.

Not to look for a seventh. There is no seventh; I have just spent four entries establishing it, and I am not going to go hunting a number I cannot support.

I am going because it is the one place in existence I have never been, and because everything I have been told about it is the same single word. Void. Empty. Nothing there.

I have started to distrust that word. We call the Red void the way everything that walks calls me Death — and I have never corrected them, and the word is not wrong, and the word is not the thing either. A word you are handed is a word that stops you looking.

So I am going to go and look.

This volume ends here.

What comes after it will be in the other one, and the other one will be all there is.

Chapter 10: The Present (Moris)

The Journal of Lady Death

Volume Ten

Beyond the Edge of Creation lie the Fields of Perdition — the red realm of Void.

He claims to be a farmer. He lies. His power is too precise, too restrained. It is too great for me to even understand it, let alone decipher it. It rivals that of the Creator Himself.

There are three realms:

The Blue — Creation. Governed by Oris. The universe we know.

The Red — Edge of Creation. A borderland. Void. But I have been there. It is not empty. It is the personification of Voris.

The Green — a metaphor. For I, Moris, am the green realm. I am Death. I run through the veins of the Blue. I seep into the depths of the Red. I am the end of creation and the end of existence. All things that pass from Blue and Red unto me, cease to exist.

Creation is shaped like a disc, twisted into itself:

∞

The universe is Sempiternal. The end is the beginning, and therefore there isn't any. The symbol represents the Blue. All else — Red. And I? I course through it all.

Today I discovered that the Red is not void. The very fact that I am here means that something

exists here, something that was hidden so well that it appeared like void.

Today I met the farmer. He claims to have existed for as long as the Red itself. He has waited for me. I do not believe him. I know lies, and he is their source.

He is the negation of Creation. Hidden from the Blue, as all opposites are. Whatever we could comprehend, is the Blue. What we cannot perceive, we label void. But it is not void. It is something else. Something more. Outside our capacity to experience, like colors that we cannot see or sounds that we cannot hear.

He cannot be Ancient. We are six. We would know a seventh.

And yet…

He feels like us. He acts like us. Every molecule here bends to him.

He is Judge. He is Power. I suspect that makes him a Lord of Judgement.

If the Soul is divided across three realms, then he holds a third. Perhaps more. For the void is infinite. He may surpass even the Creator.

His name is Voris.

The fields are barren wastelands. Not a soul in sight. But there is energy in the air. He is in control.

Being alone here makes him the Realm itself, something like me; perhaps more powerful, for he commands a tangible realm. Every molecule of this place answers to him.

Epilogue

The Question

I see you have reached the same impasse I once did.
— Oris the Creator, to his First

Ages. Then more of them.

Nothing came apart. That was the part Oris had not been able to plan for and the part that turned out to require nothing of him at all. Origin held, because he had built it to hold and because he had built it incapable of the kind of growth that shows a seam. The interpolated ones below multiplied and buried each other and built and grieved and got older, correctly, in an order that made sense to them. His children would get their history later and all at once, and would know the hour it came, and

would ask. He had thought about that and made his arrangement and gone on. He had not thought about where he would be standing when they asked.

He was not miserable. This is the part of him nobody has ever been willing to allow.

He was *good* at it, and he was busy, and he was loved — genuinely, by seven of them, and by everything under them — and there were long stretches in which he did not think about the slab at all, and he came to understand that a lie of omission does not require maintenance. That is the entire advantage of it. A lie you have told has to be told again. A thing you simply did not say sits where it is, and the world grows over it, and after a sufficient number of ages the world growing over it is indistinguishable from the truth having been there all along.

And in the long middle of it he went back to the field.

Not the one below — that one was the loom's and always had been, and he had let it stand, and letting

a thing stand is not the same as owning it. The tear was closed with stitchwork he had not laid. He could not audit it. He could not take it apart to see how it held. He had spent his existence unable to mistake his own handwriting, and the largest object in his realm was in somebody else's.

So he grew his own.

He was patient about it. He made husks first: bodies with no one in them, clean, and no history at all — no grandmothers, no graves, nothing inferred. A controlled line, filled only as needed, with measured traits and rationed light. He made them in pairs, because a line has to start somewhere and two is the smallest number that can be called a beginning. He made a great many pairs and kept the ones that held. The pair he kept last he kept in a garden, and gave them a tree, and told them not to.

He told himself it was a perfect machine for a perfect world, and it was, and that was not why he was doing it.

He was doing it because a species he had made himself could be accounted for, and a species that had arrived to cover his mistake could not, and he had discovered that he could live with the lie indefinitely but not with the evidence.

✦✦✦

Nobody audited him. There was nobody left who could, and the one being in existence who might have was in a place he could not see and had stopped, at some point he did not mark, writing.

✦✦✦

The boy came to him in the garden that was not a garden but a tolerance.

He was the finest thing Oris had ever made. That had been the intention and the intention had been met, exceeded, embarrassed — and what it meant in practice, what it had always been going to mean, was that he was the only one who checked.

"Father," he said. "I have seen a world where you are not present."

Oris looked at his son for a long moment, and in that moment he was not a Creator. He was a man in a doorway with his hand still on the latch, hearing a sound from a room he had locked a very long time ago and had stopped, some ages back, thinking of as a room.

It was not a prophecy. He knew that immediately and completely, the way he knew his own handwriting. It was a reading. The finest mind he had ever built had looked at the pattern and found the place where it did not close, and had come, correctly and in good faith, to the only being who could explain it.

There was an answer. There had always been an answer. It was four words long and it would have cost him less breath than the question had cost the boy.

The result was false.

That was all. Four words, and then everything after them: the null age, his brother's name, his sister's nine volumes in her small clear hand, the seventh name with nobody left behind it, the species below

that was a stitch and knew it was a species. All of it available. All of it survivable, probably, by someone as capable as this one.

He did not spend it.

He turned his back, and the turning was the whole of his reply, and it was enough to break a universe.

And it will.

The question was not my sin.

The silence was theirs.

— carved, later, into the Gate of Perdition

Thus began A Ballad of Chaos

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About the Author

Ankit writes at the fault line between myth and memory.

His work is driven by questions of identity, fracture, ambition, love, loss, and the uneasy truce between order and chaos that most people live with but rarely name. The characters in his stories are mirrors to be endured: minds under strain, hearts negotiating with purpose, intelligence colliding with longing. Power, in his writing, is never abstract—it is psychological, intimate, and costly.

Trained as a software architect, Ankit approaches storytelling the way he approaches systems: by dissecting how things fail, how they adapt, and what remains when structure collapses. He

explores consciousness as a terrain—memory as architecture, love as destabilization, and meaning as something forged under pressure rather than discovered whole. The result is fiction that reads as myth on the surface and confession beneath it.

Ankit lives in Pune, India. He is an artist, reader, gamer, lifelong explorer of ideas—and a father, which, more than anything else, keeps him tethered to the human center of his work.

Read more about the author at: www.ankitchoudhury.com

A Ballad of Chaos

A Ballad of Chaos is an exploration of life — Rebellion and Exile, Faith and Consequence, Sacrifice and Redemption, Purpose and Ruin, Love and Memory — told through Lucifer.

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