

Chapter One - The End of the World

Rise of the After Lord

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Chapter One

“Lord of the After, Keeper of Dreams! Answer the cries of this decaying world! Cleanse our suffering with the fire of Thy eternal grace, O great World Devourer...”

The droning liturgies of the After Cult’s morning service seeped into Mica’s dimly lit prison cell, pulling her from restless slumber. *Still alive.* She buried her face in the pillow, muffling a scream of frustration. The nightmare that had hammered at her skull all night now shattered into visceral bits of memories: her mother’s corpse with its rictus smile, pools of tarry black blood, Pandora slumped over a steel desk with the top of her head blown off...

As the dream retreated, the cold sweats and bone-shaking tremors of drug withdrawal crept in. Rolling to the side of her thin, miserable cot, she threw up the oily broth her captors had force-fed her the previous night. Then she clung to the bed’s edge with trembling fingers, a knot of desperation forming in her chest.

If only she could decipher something new from her dreams, something that might hold value to her captors. Maybe then, they’d let her go.

Within their delusions, the Cult clung to the maddening belief that Mica’s dreams concealed a gateway to another world. Each day, they forced her to sift through her nightmares, viciously reawakening

a trauma she'd spent nine long years trying to forget. Still, the portal remained hidden. Did it even exist? she wondered bitterly. Or was it just another figment of their collective insanity?

She lifted her head, and through watery eyes gazed at the fifty-two fine white scratches etched on the wall opposite her bed: one line for each day of her imprisonment.

How long before their patience ran out, and they killed her?

“And all the ends of this broken Earth shall witness the glory of our God. For He shall emerge from the Dream to devour the old and bring forth the new. Forever He shall reign. Amen.”

The final hymn echoed from a distance, resonating through the abandoned factory-turned-church, reaching the makeshift prison cells on the third floor. Mica shivered in the cold air of the windowless room, the thin brown robes they'd given her soaked with sweat and freezing-cold against her skin. The familiar dread was setting in, replacing despair.

The service was over. They'd be coming for her soon.

The minutes dragged on, each more agonizing than the last. Every tick of the unseen clock echoed in her mind, amplifying her anxiety. As the hour approached its end, a loud beep pierced the silence, signaling the completion of her prison cell's security scan. Sick with anticipation, she sat on the edge of her creaking cot, clenching her knuckles tight in her lap. Then, with a soft-but-distinct snick, the door lock released.

When she saw who stood there, the monstrosity who'd once been a man, she made a horrified gurgle in her throat, somewhere between a cry and a groan, and shrank back against the wall behind her bed. This was no ordinary priest.

High Father Holy.

The After Cult's lunatic leader filled the room with his awful presence. A mask of shimmering silver biosteel obscured his true face with the visage of a dimple-cheeked toddler whose rosebud smile moved as naturally as if made of flesh. That mockery of innocence was more horrifying than the bestial masks worn by the other high priests.

And yet the mask was the most human thing about him.

High Father Holy was a mod. The Technocrats had gutted his human body years ago and filled it with their technology. She couldn't even guess how he'd broken free from their control, but like all orphaned mods, he'd left part of his mind behind. The ravages of time on the cult leader's modified form were evident. Without the care of the Technocrats' technologists, it appeared he'd resorted to scavenging, patching himself up with mismatched parts sourced from shady black-market recyclers who traded in the Technocrats' leftovers. This makeshift maintenance was glaringly visible—bundles of wires and tubes snaking into the nape of his neck, pumping the cocktail of stims needed to sustain his life. The rest of his machine body was concealed beneath an austere white robe that flowed to the floor and spilled out to his wrists, but the hands were bare of flesh, revealing skeletal metal fingers.

More than once, she'd overheard the frightened whispers of acolytes discussing the deterioration of their leader's physical state and his growing detachment from reality. She'd only witnessed it herself from a safe distance, during the early days of her captivity when the Cult had forced her to attend their worship services. She'd watched him ranting about the end of the world from his pulpit, his steel fingers clawing at the air in fits of zealotry while the congregation echoed his madness with their cries of exultation.

But sometimes he seemed to lose the threads of his sermons, standing mute and staring into space as if locked inside the abyss of his own

mind, or he'd scream incoherently and go on a rampage, tearing apart his surroundings. Once, he'd even ripped the pulpit from the floor and thrown it at his adherents.

During these episodes, one of the other priests would step in and claim that their leader was in communion with the After Lord and no longer in control of his own body. The congregation loved it. The sanctuary would fill with the sounds of jubilation as the fanatical crowd lifted their hands into the air and sang praises to the After Lord.

Judging by the look in his eyes, he was having one of those episodes right now.

"You!" The childish lips of the priest's mask twisted with fury. He lunged at his captive, his arm shooting out, his steel fingers snaring her by the throat and squeezing. "You stole my dreams."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" she choked, the words not reaching her lips as anything more than a gasp.

"Our Lord has withdrawn his favor from me. He no longer speaks in my dreams." His voice cracked, unstable, a child's warble on the edge of tears. "And why should He? We have failed Him time and time again. We put our trust in those with the Traitor's blood, but we were wrong. Lord, forgive us!"

Traitor's blood? What was he going on about? Was this some new delusion?

Terrified, Mica kicked at her assailant, her vision dancing between darkness and light as he pulled her up into the air by the neck. Her hands clawed at his steel grip, trying to loosen his fingers and failing. Panic replaced the pain as her last breath evaporated and her chest burned with suffocation.

"Please, Your Holiness!" an unfamiliar voice called from the darkness.

She heard the frantic shuffle of movement, hands prying her body out of that killing grip. Her throat opened and she sucked in a grateful breath, collapsing backward into the waiting arms of a gray-robed acolyte, his young face a mix of terror, gawkiness, and rat teeth. Mica's eyes focused and fixed on the second newcomer: another masked priest, the one who'd called out on her behalf.

Only high priests wore masks, but she didn't recognize this one: He wore the guise of a serpent over his face, its silvery scales shimmering across the biosteel surface as its nostrils flared and its mouth stretched thin with tension.

"If you kill her, there are no others left to take her place," he reminded his superior, his voice echoing from behind the reptilian visage, the metal distorting its natural timbre.

Mica's heart sank. So the others were dead, then. She'd never seen their faces, only heard their desperate wails from neighboring cells. In the early days, she'd tried calling out to them, but their minds had already slipped away, driven mad by their dreams. Three days ago, the final whisper died out, leaving Mica wondering when her turn would come.

An eerie calm came over the cult leader at his inferior's words, his mania slipping away like a bad dream. "We have fallen off the righteous path, Father Dark," he said. "We will make a sacrifice of her tonight, and when the blood of Revan spills, our Lord will show me the portal."

Sacrifice? The very word sent a deep, cold dread spiraling down her spine. The horrifying images of how they might take her life flooded her mind, each more gruesome than the last.

Mica bolted for the open door. Her heart thundered against her ribcage. The rodent-faced acolyte who'd caught her earlier fall lunged

after her with a cry, but caught the hem of his robe underfoot. He crashed forward, mouth agape, and skidded across the dusty floor.

A second acolyte, this one broad and towering, blocked her path. His bearish face was set in a grimace of determination as he tried to wrap his thick arms around her. Mica pivoted and drove her elbow sharply upward, feeling a satisfying crunch as it connected with his nose, the youth recoiling with a howl as she lunged past him.

A perilously narrow hallway opened before her, lined with old crates, rusty corrugated sheets nailed to the walls and broken up by a succession of closed cell doors, including one marked with a long-dried bloody handprint. As she ran, she kicked loose crates into her pursuers' path, gratified to hear their muffled curses as they stumbled over the obstacles.

This wasn't Mica's first escape attempt. The sanctuary downstairs had a front foyer that opened into the streets of Zeta's undercity, an invitation to the disillusioned masses to attend the Cult's worship services. Beyond that, she was certain she could lose any pursuers in the labyrinth of alleyways and half-ruined buildings that made up the city's second quadrant.

"After her!" High Father Holy's voice roared out behind her, a mixture of rage and desperation. "Don't let her get away!"

Her legs shook with terror as she bypassed the stairwell leading down and veered off to a side passage. There, she found a decrepit elevator shaft. The lift was long gone, but cables dangled temptingly. Without hesitation, she began her descent, hoping it would lead her closer to the exit. Two floors down, she paused to listen. The muted sounds of footsteps and frustrated voices echoed from above. She exhaled her relief. Good. They hadn't thought to pursue her this way.

She emerged into a vast, dimly lit storage space, its tall shelves casting eerie, elongated shadows. Here, relics of the past—old machinery,

broken automatons, and crates filled with forgotten parts—lay dormant. Mica wove through them, using the darkness as cover.

Exiting the storage, she encountered another corridor. The walls here showcased murals of winged men and apocalyptic scenes, crudely painted in stark colors, while gleaming orbs of light floated nearby, illuminating the artwork with a sinister glow. But what caught her eye was a distant back stairwell with a sign pointing downward: “Sanctuary.” Mica smiled.

Before she could move, a loud metallic clang reverberated from the floor above, startling her into action. The acolytes had found her escape route! Their muffled voices grew louder as she sprinted toward the distant staircase. The streets were so close, she could almost taste the stagnant undercity air.

But out of nowhere, just as freedom was within her grasp, a shadow burst from a side-passage. Before she could react, a powerful hand yanked her hair from behind, twisting it until her knees buckled beneath her. It was the larger acolyte, his bearish grasp finally finding its mark.

“We have her secured, Your Holiness!” he called.

“Ow, let go!”

A few minutes later, High Father Holy arrived, walking toward them with a slow, uneven gait—*shuffle, scrape, shuffle, scrape*. He released a sigh that sounded like a soft whistle. “You’ve done well, Brother.” He then turned to the rat-faced acolyte. “Summon our brethren to the sanctuary. Tell them to begin preparations.”

“Is this what you did to the others?!” Mica’s voice broke as she recalled the tormented wails of those other faceless prisoners and the last three days of silence. “Did you sacrifice them too?” She watched in despair as the acolyte vanished down the stairs to freedom out of her own reach, his gray robes flapping around his ankles.

Father Dark arrived, the mouth of his snake mask curled downward as he regarded his leader, his hollowed eyes betraying a flicker of discontent. “High Father, I beg you to delay the ceremony until tomorrow,” he said. “You’re not well. Your stims need replenishing. I’ve found a new supplier—”

“You’d protect her?”

“I protect *us*. We can’t afford to make another mistake, not when all our other plans are falling into place. Our efforts in the north are reaching fruition thanks to our new allies, and our influence in the southern undercities continues to grow unimpeded. But all of that will amount to nothing if we can’t open the Blood Gate. There are no other chances. She is the only one left.”

That the Cult was spreading, infesting the world outside Under-Zeta, left Mica cold with fear, not for herself but for the ones she’d be leaving behind. Reid... Samiel...

“The Traitor’s blood taints her. Just like the others, she will fall into madness, and the portal will not open for her.” High Father Holy’s posture tensed, wreathed with hostility. “Once her life spills out on His altar, our Lord will show me the portal. I will be the one to awaken Him.”

There was a pause from the lesser priest, then a tremulous question, full of hope: “Our Lord has spoken this to you?”

“I am His mouthpiece.”

“Praise be to the After Lord!”

Mica didn’t miss the relief in that proclamation. Acting with new resolve, Father Dark stepped to her side, pulling her free from the stocky acolyte’s grip.

“High Father Holy’s lying,” she said, latching onto the other priest’s hesitation. “Your god no longer speaks to him. He told me himself—”

The High Father backhanded her. The strike came out of nowhere, landing on her jaw in an explosion of pain, the impact sending both Mica and her serpent-masked captor staggering backward as the other priest absorbed the weight of her falling body. The remaining acolyte cried out in alarm as he rushed to attend to Father Dark. Blood spilled from Mica's nose and down the front of her robes.

"Deceiver!" High Father Holy's fists clenched, a wrathful energy gathering into a storm around him. The expression on his mask was that of a toddler amid a full-blown tantrum, only with murder in his eyes. "I should kill you now!"

Once more, the other priest intervened, rolling Mica's body behind him defensively as he soothed his mad master. "Remember our Lord's purpose, Your Holiness! If we don't perform the proper ritual before she dies, you might not be able to access the portal. Let the After Lord judge her actions."

"Yes... Yes, you're right." It was the strangest thing to watch the transformation. It was like a light went out in the cult leader's eyes, his shoulders slumping as the fury evaporated, leaving behind an empty, vapid expression on his childish face. "As it should be, for all who dare defy His will." His voice drifted away as he mused. He seemed no longer aware of the others' presence at all, but wandered off toward the stairs by himself, his white robes hissing across the steel floor. "Our Lord calls us to worship," he said without looking back.

"Praise His name," both Father Dark and the acolyte responded automatically, the latter's face as tight as a corpse left to mummify.

Once their superior was out of hearing range, the priest turned to the acolyte. "Tend to the High Father," he said. "Make sure he tops up his stims. His connection to the After Lord must not falter during the ritual."

The acolyte grunted assent. "Yes, Father."

Clutching her bloody nose, Mica watched the gray-robed acolyte rush away, then turned to the masked man beside her. His earlier intercession on her behalf and his calm demeanor made her hopeful he was someone she could reason with. “You know High Father Holy’s crazy, right?”

The priest tempered his reply with patience. “A mortal mind can’t bear the presence of a God without consequences. But the After Lord will reward his sacrifice in the new world.”

She could’ve told him it wasn’t a god that was chewing through High Father Holy’s brain but years of bad stims and shoddy biotech integration, but there was no reasoning with fanatics. Fresh nausea surged inside her head. She stooped to vomit and when she straightened up again, Father Dark was holding out a small cannister of angel breath.

Her fear melted away, replaced by a humiliating wave of relief.

“It will help with the pain,” he murmured. With a slow, deliberate motion, he cracked the seal, releasing the potent, intoxicating aroma of the drug.

Mica inhaled sharply, the mere scent of it tugging at a raw yearning deep within her. The pull of her addiction, rooted in the tragedy that had claimed most of her family, overpowered her.

“Why... are you helping me?” she whispered, her voice thick with both desperation and suspicion.

The cultist hesitated, his fingers trembling ever-so-slightly. “Even as we uphold the After Lord’s vision, there are still moments in which we can offer solace.”

Mica eyed the container warily. Despite her deep-rooted mistrust of the Cult, the weight of her addiction bore down heavily. The craving, the desperate need to escape even momentarily from the relentless pain of this place, was almost unbearable.

“It’s genuine,” he said. “No tricks.”

One shot and she’d knock out all the pain, all the sickness, and all the fear. She was in no condition to refuse, her head pounding with need as she reached for the inhalant. Their fingers brushed, and his touch held a strange warmth, a familiarity she couldn’t place. Who was this compassionate cultist? But all questions were lost in a haze of longing as she lifted the thumb-sized container to her nose and inhaled the intoxicant inside, feeling the instant calm shoot through her skull, erasing all terrible things from her mind. Her muscles relaxed and her knees buckled as her cares drifted away.

Father Dark slipped an arm behind her back. The smell of him, the sharp citrus fragrance of lumin lichen infused with the steel stink of a recycler’s workshop, reminded her of home, of Under-Alpha, and an unexpected wave of homesickness washed over her.

She wished she’d never left, no matter how many terrible memories lived there.

He half-carried, half-dragged her down the stairs, but she didn’t care. Another pair of acolytes waiting at the bottom rushed to open the sanctuary doors.

The wide-open space had once housed manufacturing machinery, but its interior had been stripped down to bare floor and converted into a worship space for the Cult. Against the distant ceiling hovered about a hundred pyrospheres, small orange orbs that cast a warm, fiery light over the worshippers below. The familiar cloying fragrance of incense hung in the air and burned her nostrils. She scanned the rows of cheap plasticine benches lining the floor, her eyes finally landing on the steel platform from which High Father Holy delivered his mad sermons and on which sat the seat of her death: the After Lord’s altar.

The altar was both beautiful and grotesque. Its maker had chiseled it out of white marble, depicting angelic figures armored for battle

with spears in their hands and fire in their fingers, but whose perfect feet trampled the twisted, agonized bodies of human beings.

This was what they worshipped: their own annihilation.

Drugged into blissful indifference, Mica allowed her escort to pull her inside. She'd suffered through many a service in this unholy place. At the beginning of her captivity, her abductors had tried to make a believer out of her, hoping that devotion to their god would help her find the portal. She thought she'd made a good show of it, moving her lips to their insufferable hymns and joining the congregation in shouting glories to the After Lord, but they'd seen right through her act and had moved onto violence.

Armed with a torturer's knowledge of the human body and access to expensive healing stims, her captors had bruised, battered, and shattered every part of her, extracting enormous amounts of pain while keeping her alive. All in hopes that enough fear and pain would break through the blockage in her mind that kept her from uncovering the portal.

That hadn't worked out for them, either. Hysterical laughter bubbled from her lips. Turned out opening an imaginary doorway was a lot harder than worshipping an imaginary god. She wondered how could anyone could worship this grotesque fiction, this 'After Lord'? The very concept of the divine had been wiped out long ago, reduced to children's stories, yet these fanatics seemed determined to drag everyone down into their twisted delusions. Much as she despised the Technocrats, they'd been right to outlaw religion. If they ever learned about the Cult's activities in Under-Zeta, they'd send in their war mods to gut this church and turn its insane adherents into paste.

She could only hope.

With bleary eyes, she surveyed the congregation: six priests and twenty acolytes lining the benches, some on their knees, some standing

with arms uplifted, some murmuring quietly and others shouting praises at the ceiling. To her blurred consciousness, the din of their worship blended into one unified sound, the roar of water rushing through an underground tunnel. Then High Father Holy stepped onto the platform.

The cacophony of prayers changed and transformed into a hymn. Mica found herself caught up in the sound of it. Maybe it was the delicious lull of angel breath coursing through her system, making the atrocious into something beautiful, but the hymns she'd once judged as bloated and obnoxious stirred something new inside her.

“O Lord, Bringer of Hope! You are the End and the Beginning. Take our dreams and transform us. Strip away our sinful humanity! Devour this wicked world!”

Her mind floated along the current of their song. What if all the terrible things, all the suffering in this world, could really be erased? If her sacrifice meant that her loved ones could live in paradise, would dying be so bad? Life under the Technocracy was a brutal existence, a constant fight over scraps, where the powerful preyed on the weak. But even the powerful were helpless against the recruiters that came to the undercities in search of new subjects for their masters' sick experiments.

“Amen.”

The chanting faded into silence and High Father Holy raised his arms, the sleeves slipping back to his elbows, revealing rusty steel bones strung with artificial tendons. His face, masked with the innocence of a child, beamed out at his adherents, and even angel breath couldn't completely erase the repulsion it stirred inside her.

“We gather here today to witness the birth of a new world! Praise be to The One who makes dreams a reality! Who treads the dark and

brings forth light! The Gate shall open when the blood of the Traitor spills.”

Who was this traitor, the source of the blood that condemned her to death? Even through the haze of her high, Mica could feel the dread creeping back in, the stomach-twisting horror of her own impending doom. Panic tightened her chest. She looked toward Father Dark pleadingly, hoping he might offer her another shot to ease her anxiety, but the priest’s eyes were fastened on his superior and his face blazed with fervor. He began dragging her up the stairs toward the altar.

“No!” Her high crumbled as she fought his hold. But the drug had slowed her mind and retarded her reflexes, leaving her as helpless as a disobedient toddler tugging back on their mother’s insistent pull. “Please! I’ll try harder! I can find your portal. Just give me another chance!”

“Too late for that, Deceiver.” The hollow eyes of High Father Holy’s infantile mask filled with a red fire that blazed with hatred. “We have endured your lies long enough. The After Lord has shown me the truth!”

“You’re nothing but a fraud—”

Father Dark yanked her up the last step of the platform, cutting off her accusations.

“Lie down on the altar,” he ordered. The serpentine mask remained unreadable, but she heard the tension in his voice. “It will be over quickly. I promise you.”

“Like I’d trust you!” She tried to break away, but two older acolytes stepped forward to assist the priest, lifting her struggling body onto the stone table. Her back scraped against the stonework and opened an old wound, causing her to scream as she relived the kiss of the whip that had made it. She fought with all the ferocity of a cornered rat

facing extermination, her spine curving as she tried to heave herself out of their grip.

Father Dark stood overhead, his face placid as he held her head in place. One pair of acolytes pinned her down by the arms and another pair restrained her legs. She twisted and strained until she exhausted herself, then stared up in bleak horror at the distant steel rafters overhead, terrified tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Please don’t kill me! I’ll do whatever you say. I can believe. I just need more time!”

A sigh released from behind the serpentine mask. Was that regret she heard? “No. Your blood corrupts you. It makes you deaf to the calling of our Lord. High Father Holy has heard Him speak: Your death is what will reveal the portal to us.”

“If that’s true, then why would your god wait so long to tell you?”

“Every word from your mouth is a blasphemy.” An immense sadness burdened his voice. “It is not for mortals to question the will of our Lord. He will cleanse you along with the rest of the world, and if He finds you worthy, He’ll make you anew.”

Her only answer was a sob.

“We begin!” their leader announced.

The priests and acolytes took up a haunting prayer of supplication, begging the After Lord to awaken and save the world, their voices echoing off the walls of the sanctuary as they sang a dark devotion to her doom.

“Awaken, O Lord! Bring forth Thine armies to cover the Earth. Thine enemies shall turn to ash before Thy radiance!”

She couldn’t turn her head to see, but the creak of unoiled steel and the hiss of a broken joint in his left arm announced High Father Holy’s presence at her side. His terrifying child mask hovered overhead, and she could see the bone-colored blade gripped in his metal fingers. The

blade was carved into the likeness of a winged serpent, with scaly coils wrapped around the base to form a hilt, and the feathered wings stretched out as the cross-guard.

A new, inexplicable fear awakened inside her, something deeper than her desire for self-preservation. She'd felt this kind of dread only once before, while deep within the ancient ruins beneath Under-Alpha, staring into a bottomless pool. A malevolent presence settled on her mind like a vulture awaiting carnage.

No, it couldn't be the same thing. Her teeth chattered. Not here...

"Lord of the After, accept this offering of the Traitor's blood as our tribute!" cried the cult leader. "Show me the path to the Blood Gate, so that I may open its doors and You may enter this world to deliver us from all sin!"

High Father Holy pressed the knife against her throat, and she swore she heard a heart beating from within it—but the priest stopped short of cutting, his head jerking upward, his burning eyes transfixed on something she couldn't see.

"My Lord?" he whispered, his voice shaking.

Then Mica heard it inside her head, a dark voice rasping against her mind: "*Kill them.*"

And the world around her turned black.