



# FIRES OF TRUTH

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The early sunlight radiated from the horizon like a golden halo, reaching out across Llael to banish the cold black of night. Malekus, prostrate at his morning devotional, felt the glory of his god fill him in the new dawn. He imagined the warm rays on his armor were the soft brush of Menoth's own hand, the fire of judgment once more finding Malekus worthy of the day's bounty. In his mind's eye he saw the inviolable walls of Sul and beyond them the magnificent architecture of the Temple of the Flame, home to his order in that ancient city. The mere existence of these awesome works was proof enough of Menoth's glory on Caen. The sun shone stronger there in the arid lands of the Protectorate homeland. Malekus missed the intensity of that heat.

Menoth the Creator had brought order to the chaos of the world, he reflected. Menoth had given man the gift of Flame so they might expunge the darkness that infected the world like a sickness. Menoth had given them the Wall so they might stand as a bulwark against evil. Though there were other gods, all that man had accomplished throughout history had been at the allowance of the Creator. It was only proper to revere Menoth above all others.

Malekus rose, unimpeded by his bulky warcaster armor. He hefted his blessed flamethrower and for a moment watched the holy fire within its bladed head flicker and dance. Though all men benefited from the gift of Flame, only a chosen few were anointed to use its cleansing touch to purge the world of the profane and the blasphemous. Malekus, the Burning Truth was one of those few, given his holy charge by Feora, Priestess

and Protector of the Flame. Moreover, he was also chosen by Menoth to bear the even greater responsibility of being a warcaster: one of the rare individuals possessing the ability to control warjacks, the mightiest weapons of the Great Crusade.

He looked toward the small town a little more than half a mile off. Despite the scars of war from when the Protectorate had overtaken these lands, the Llaeese countryside was beautiful. Wisps of smoke from dwindling cooking fires trailed up from the chimneys of the town's tightly clustered houses.

Malekus reached out with his mind to the cortex of his Repenter. The machine stomped its feet impatiently, and he briefly connected with the other light warjack in his battlegroup, a Revenger, as well. Then he did the same with the hulking Castigator and felt the air around the heavy 'jack's flaming hands rippling with intense heat. The machine clanged its steel fists together, eager to come to grips with the enemy. Malekus mentally stoked its righteous fury. He had chosen this particular Castigator because of its notorious temperament; there was no place for timidity when meting out Menoth's divine justice.

His battlegroup alongside him, Malekus approached the town and made his way to the central courtyard, keenly aware that many hidden eyes observed his progress. When he arrived at the town square, the mayor stood waiting with a pair of rough-looking men at his side. Several townsfolk stood near the square or peered from doorways or windows to watch. Malekus mentally directed the Castigator and Revenger to flank the mayor's small group, and the Castigator flexed its flame fists menacingly as it stared down the men, who shifted on their feet and swallowed reflexively. Malekus tightened his mental hold on the machine to keep its fiery nature in check for the moment. He had words for these people first.

"We are blessed to be visited by an envoy of the Temple," the mayor said, bowing. His eyes flicked nervously about behind the wire-frame glasses that balanced on his thin, sharp nose.

"You know why I have come," Malekus said. The distinctive rasping voice emanating from below his golden mask was powerful with command and carried easily across the square. "I am here to deliver Menoth's judgment. To cleanse you of your crimes so they do not fester and spread."

“Crimes?” the mayor asked in an overly innocent tone. “I do not know what you mean.”

“You have broken your oaths to the Sul-Menite Temple and the hierarch.” Malekus kept his voice level, though the words made fire swell within his breast.

“We provide the tithes required of us without fail, despite the heavy burden they place on our small town,” the mayor protested. Malekus heard murmurs of agreement from those gathered behind him.

He raised his voice slightly so all could hear. “Six months ago you were tasked with building a temple to Menoth, but you have yet to even break earth. Worse, you turned away the priest sent by the hierarch himself to lead you back to the path of righteousness.”

“Please understand,” the mayor said, “we are a poor community, and these are troubled times. We have little beyond the barest means to survive. We have no resources to build a new temple—not yet. And we could not house the Temple’s emissary in the comfort he is due.”

Malekus pointed to a Morrowan church standing on one side of the square. Though the building was simple, above its entryway hung a large, gleaming gold Radiance, the symbol of the god Morrow.

“You dare make such claims while *this* still stands?” the warcaster said. “That ostentatious trinket alone is worth more than enough to fund a temple for the Creator of Man, with enough left over to cast a Menofix worthy of adorning it.”

Shrinking under the force of these words, the mayor spoke rapidly. “That church has stood for over two hundred years, since the founding of this town. The Radiance was a gift from the Sancteum in Caspia! We cannot simply melt down the holy symbol of Morrow—”

“How long has it been since your town suffered at the hands of outsiders?” Malekus turned to address the citizens, both those in the square and those he knew were watching in secret. “Do you know the *price* of that comfort?”

None dared meet his gaze.

“Three hundred eighty-seven,” he said.

“I don’t understand,” the mayor said as Malekus walked toward him.

“Three hundred eighty-seven righteous souls proved their devotion to Menoth by giving their lives repelling the latest Khadoran attacks in Llael.” The warcaster fixed his stare upon the cowering mayor. “All so you could continue to live in peace—yet you ignore your obligation.”

“We did not ask for that protection or that sacrifice,” the mayor said, backing away.

“Yet you gladly enjoy its fruits.”

“The hierarch’s demands are impossible! We barely have enough to feed ourselves after his severe tithes.”

*“Strength is found in suffering, and through strength does man prove himself worthy of Menoth,”* Malekus replied, intoning a passage from the Canon of the True Law.

“What more could we suffer?” The mayor’s eyes were now alive with desperation. “Severius has already taken everything—”

“You will refer to him as ‘Hierarch,’ blasphemer!” Malekus roared, and the mayor stumbled backward and fell to the ground. “All you have in this world comes from Menoth, gifts given to man because he proved himself worthy.”

Malekus thumbed the activation switch of his holy weapon, and its flame quickened between the blades at its tip. His gravelly voice became a dangerous growl. “You are like children who have been spared the lash too long, growing lazy and fat in your wickedness. You have become unworthy of Menoth’s gifts.”

These words were punctuated by the roar of the Repenter’s flamethrower as it loosed a blazing stream of Menoth’s Fury at the nearest building. At the same time, Malekus sent the Castigator charging forward to descend upon the mayor’s house with powerful blows. Its superheated fists ignited the heavy timbers, and flames quickly engulfed the structure. Townsfolk screamed as it collapsed with a thunderous crash, the flaming debris pattering harmlessly off the warjack’s blessed metal hull.

On his knees, the mayor cried out, “Do you mean to kill us all?”

“Menoth’s holy flame will reclaim you as he deems fit,” Malekus said. “Those who are spared can appeal to him for redemption.” He turned

and walked toward the church, leveling his flamethrower to unleash a gout of cleansing fire. The flames took hold and burned as if stoked by Menoth's own breath. In moments, the golden Radiance above the doors had melted to slag. Chaos broke out as panicked townsfolk raced for their homes and families.

Malekus urged his warjacks to continue their anointed mission; looking through their eyes, he saw building after building set ablaze. As he walked toward an untouched building that appeared to be a schoolhouse, a soot-stained woman threw herself at his feet.

"Please, spare me!" she cried, her trembling hand snatching at his robes. "I have seen my wickedness. I wish to pledge my life to Menoth!"

Malekus looked down at the weeping woman through his burnished mask and hesitated. He understood well how Menoth's will became manifest in his holy flames. His voice soft, he said, "You have seen the truth? You have felt the fire cleanse the cancer of wickedness within you?"

"Yes! Yes!" the woman said between sobs.

Malekus felt his heart leap. *Glory*, he thought. *Glory to the Creator of Man and the revelation of his holy flame!* He touched the top of the woman's head. "Menoth's truth is wonderful, is it not, child?" he said.

Still weeping, the woman nodded vigorously, and in the light of the raging fires Malekus saw a glint of gold at her throat. Looking closer he realized she had shaken loose a pendant of Ascendant Angellia, Morrowan patron of scholars and teachers.

Memories of his childhood at the Morrowan orphanage flooded his mind. That symbol had hung from the neck of every headmaster who had beaten, burned, or starved him, those who had placed him in slavery so they could grow fat on his suffering. He thought of the priests who brought their weekly donations of bread and milk, their paltry charity giving them the peace of mind that allowed them to ignore the injustices occurring beneath their own noses. What did they care if their gifts were hoarded by corrupt headmasters? What did they care about the suffering of the hungry children who toiled to launder their vestments? What did they care about the continual fevers and wracking, scarring coughs of an impertinent boy forced to sleep alone in the deepest, coldest cellar as a lesson in humility and obedience?

Malekus was now clenching a handful of the woman's hair in his fist, and she yelped in pain and surprise as he forced her head back so he could look into her eyes.

"You teach here?" he asked, pointing toward the school. "Where are your students?"

"My— my students?" she stammered. "Gone! I saw them to safety."

His eyes narrowed and he compelled his Castigator to tear open the doors of the schoolhouse. Through its eyes he saw a mostly empty room, but there were still four terrified children within, huddled under benches. They screamed and scrambled away from the Castigator to press against the far wall. The woman looked about her in panic.

*Lies!* Fury burned white-hot within him. How could Morrow care for suffering if his teachings allowed people the freedom to indulge in evil and wickedness? No, only Menoth truly knew man's flaws and failings. Only Menoth provided a means to overcome baser instincts, through the watchful eyes of the scrutators and the unflinching service of those committed to serving the Temple and the True Law.

Malekus had set himself free from wickedness when he put that hateful orphanage to the torch, cleansing the world of the unworthy men within. Watching the place burn, he had finally understood: only Menoth's purifying flames could free the world from the suffering caused by corruption.

"Despite your failings today," he said, moving away from the woman, "you may teach your students one last lesson." He leveled his weapon at her, a heretic who had sought to lure him from his path with shameless falsehoods. In his mind echoed the words of the Menite street priest who had years ago revealed to him the path Menoth had laid out for him, and now he spoke them aloud: "Only the faithful may survive the fires of truth. Only in the cleansing of fire can the world be freed from wickedness."

As he sent forth an engulfing burst of holy flame, Malekus thanked Menoth for choosing him as a vessel to deliver that truth.

