A Better Place

By Andy Clark

Cheng hurried down the alleyway, Siana close behind him. The air of low-hive was blood warm and close. It conspired with drifting fumes to stifle each breath as he pulled it in, and turn each exhalation into a damp wheeze. The alley ran downhill between the flanks of two colossal processor shrines, with long neglected arc-lumen fizzing and faltering upon their upper levels. Little of that light reached down to the alleyway. As he followed its steep plunge into darkness, Cheng felt as though he were leading Siana down into some kind of Stygian underworld. *The Emperor can't see us down here*, he thought, but he couldn't decide whether the notion was comforting or terrifying.

'How much further?' asked Siana, in a whisper.

'You don't need to ask me, do you?' he replied, keeping his voice low and picking his way around a toppled heap of metal crates.

'Cheng…' she started, reproachfully.

'It's true though, isn't it? You're better than that, Sia,' he pressed. 'Better than all of them.'

Her hand fell on his shoulder, turning him gently but firmly to face her. She stood with the faint light of the processors at her back, her frightened features almost lost amidst the gloom of deeper shadows ahead.

'Cheng, we've spoken of this. What we can do. What's happened to us.'

'Sia- '

'It's not a gift!'

Cheng recoiled at her sudden fury, though she still managed to keep her voice at a strangled hiss. In the low-hives of Teschor, fear of catching the Arbitrators' attention was an instinct learned from birth.

'What then?' he asked. 'Sia, you can read thoughts! Who can lie to you? Who can trick or misuse you anymore?'

'It's unnatural,' Siana said, haunted. She wrang her hands together. 'It's witchcraft. Sin. It's heresy, Cheng! And so is…'

'What I can do?' he finished for her, his tone sour. 'Can't bring yourself to say it, can you?'

'We don't know why this has happened to us,' she said. Her eyes were wide and glinting in the gloom, pleading with him to understand. 'The Ecclesiarchy says that curses like these are marks of heresy! Of Daemons! We should be praying for forgiveness. We should be going to a priest, not… not this.'

'Daemons, priests,' scoffed Cheng. 'Children's tales and their peddlers. You know what our fate would be. They'd have a nice warm pyre all ready for us in Penitents' Square, just like Rennj and Yaekob.'

'Rennj was mad,' said Siana in a small, haunted voice.

'And Yaekob?' Cheng demanded. She shook her head.

'He went to the priests in good faith and they burned him,' said Cheng, and found as he did that the anger and horror of that awful day was still raw. Siana was about to reply when they heard a dull clang from somewhere above. Echoes reverberated along the alleyway. They looked at each other in fright, both thinking the same thing.

Out after curfew. No papers for this level.

Cheng and Siana clutched each other's arms amidst the shadows. They stared at one another like prey, frightened into paralysis. Cheng's heart thumped against his ribs. Despite himself, he reached for the power that had blossomed in his mind over the last few months. He felt it, a warm, somehow cloying stirring somewhere between his mind and his soul. He tried to marshal it, ready it as he might perform the arming ritual for a stub gun. It slithered away as though it had a life of its own, and in his mind he reached for it with increasing desperation. Cheng's skin prickled with heat as though he stood near an open furnace. He tasted the coppery tang of blood.

'Nothing,' said Siana, snapping him out of his reverie. Cheng abandoned his attempt to corral his newfound abilities, though he still felt the tingle as the coiling thing subsided.

'Look, Sia, you wanted to do this as much as me. The message said that if we want the Saviour to take us to the better place, it's this or nothing. Tonight. The sump pipes between processor shrines nine and ten.'

'I did,' she whispered, hesitantly. 'I do, but… what if it's wrong? What if they should burn us? We're witches, Cheng.'

'We are not witches,' he said firmly. 'This isn't our fault. We didn't do this on purpose. But it isn't going to go away, and if we stay here then they'll find us out and kill us. I don't want to die for something that isn't my doing, Sia. I don't want you to either.'

They stood a moment longer, frozen in tableau, staring at one another. Then she nodded.

'Let's move quickly then, before they really do find us.'

They hurried on down the alleyway until they were feeling their way through near-total darkness. Only a thin strip of grey light remained above them now, distant and dim. Things rustled and shifted in the darkness – questing, insectile scuffs and clicks that Cheng didn't like at all.

Just as he was beginning to fear that they might end the night being devoured by duct roaches, Cheng caught sight of a crimson glow emanating from the floor ahead. He hastened towards it and saw that it was an eye, three feet across, painted in red biolume pigment. The eye glowed balefully next to a sump cover that had been left askew.

'Here,' he whispered. 'Help me.'

The two of them got their fingers under the metal of the sump cover and dragged it aside. The scrape of metal on stone seemed deafening.

'You first,' said Siana.

'No, go,' Cheng replied, reaching again for his hidden gift as the clicking and rustling continued. She squeezed past him, finding the barely visible rungs of the ladder below and scrambling hurriedly down. Cheng followed her, pulling the cover back into place as he went. The sound of the solid clank of metal settling into place filled him with relief.

It was short lived.

'Cheng…' came Siana's wary voice from below. He heard movement in the dark, the distinctive racking of a shotgun slide. The image of Arbitrators filled his mind, waiting in this pipe to ambush muties.

'Come down lad, slow and steady,' came a smoke roughened voice. Cheng relaxed a little. That wasn't the vox amplified boom of the Arbitrators. He climbed down as quickly as he could, by feel alone, and pressed himself in next to Siana. He could sense people around them, smell the sweat of them and hear their breathing.

'Who are you?' he demanded, trying to keep the querulous note out of his voice. 'Where is the Saviour?'

There came a mechanical humming. A weird crawling sensation caressed Cheng's skin, raising goosebumps. He felt the coiled thing twitch within him, then subside.

'Psyocculum's red,' came a voice. 'They're psykers a'right, both of 'em.'

'Marvellous,' came the first, rough voice again. Cheng was forced to throw up his hands to shield his face as light blossomed in the pipe. Blinking furiously, eyes watering, he made out three Human shapes packed into the cramped tunnel around them. Each had a stab-light on their left shoulder. All had now activated them, pinning him and Siana in a pool of light.

'Where is the Saviour?' he asked again. He reached for his power without conscious thought. As he did so, a device held by one of the figures gave a warning chime.

'Woah now, no need for that,' said the rough voiced man, angling his stab-light away from them. Cheng made out scarred and rugged features and the frayed remains of a uniform. Planetary militia, maybe? He saw that the man had only his left eye; the right was a scarred pit.

'We have to check everyone who comes into the Saviour's sanctum,' said the man, pointing his shotgun away from Cheng and Siana to show he meant no harm. 'You know what the 'trators are like. Wouldn't put it past them to try something sneaky.'

'We're not Arbitrators,' said Siana. 'We just want to get off this world. We want to go to the better place.'

'And you shall,' said the man with rough cheer. He turned to the other two figures. 'Stay on guard. If they show themselves, you know what to do.'

Cheng saw a man and a woman, another two war-weathered militia deserters by the looks of them, both also boasting only their left eyes.

'Come on, Saviour's waited long enough,' said the man, turning and leading the way along the cramped pipe. Cheng had to duck as they made their way along, the scuffs and clangs of their progress rendered dull in the stifling air. He quickly found himself wrestling with claustrophobia as the pipe seemed to go on and on.

'Nearly there,' said the man, as though recognising Cheng's panic.

Perhaps he can sense it, Cheng thought. *Perhaps that's why he's here too.*

To Cheng's relief they emerged at last into a much larger space, perhaps a pumping chamber or undersump. Whatever it had once been, the space had been drained and repurposed to become a kind of shrine. Candles burned everywhere with a crimson glow. Crabbed runic characters were scrawled across the walls and ceiling, glowing with the same biolume pigment as Cheng had seen outside.

There were several dozen people already crammed into the chamber. They turned to look at Cheng and Siana as their guide brought them in. He saw other labourers and shrine-hands here but, to his surprise, there were also clerks, minor acolytes, fungus farmers and one person he could have sworn was some young uphiver lordling hidden under a heavy cloak.

Above them, stood upon a raised dais and surrounded by candles, was the Saviour. *It has to be him*, Cheng thought. He took in the man's flowing blue robes, the golden torque about his neck and the faintly glowing amulet against his chest. The man's face was seamed and kindly with a close-cropped white beard. Like his guards, Cheng saw the Saviour had only one eye.

'Welcome, lost ones,' said the Saviour as they entered. His voice was warm and deep, reassuring yet somehow powerful. 'Congratulations. You have found the first step upon the path. Rest assured, that first step is the hardest. From here onwards the light of the Crimson King shall be your beacon.'

Cheng went to speak, perhaps to say some words of thanks or ask a question. The hard, impatient stares of the others gathered there choked the words off in his throat. Instead, he followed Siana to a place at the back of the gathering. As the Saviour spoke on, his hand found hers.

'You have been told you are heretics,' said the Saviour, and in his voice there was anger and sorrow.

Not at us, Cheng thought, with a surge of relief. *On our behalf.*

'You have been told that what you can do, the powers you have developed, are evil. You have hidden your gifts, lurked like criminals, cowered in the shadows like unclean things from the very authorities who should have embraced you for the miraculous beings you are!'

Murmuring filled the chamber, angry oaths and words of outraged agreement.

'You are not monsters, my friends,' the Saviour continued. He offered them a benevolent smile. 'You are ascendant beings! You are superior in every way to the grubbing herd of Humanity. That is why the priests and the Arbitrators call you witch. That is why they hunt you, persecute you… burn you.'

More angry voices, louder now.

'Bastards!'

'They burned Kelwyn and he never did nothin' wrong!'

'What gives them the right?'

The Saviour raised his hands to quiet them.

'Indeed. They persecute you because you are strong, because your strength exposes just how weak they are! But fear not, beloved friends. There is one who knows your true value. The Crimson King knows you. The Crimson King sees you, sees the future of this benighted race. The Emperor and all his servants would burn you in the fires of ignorance, but the Crimson King will raise you into the light of true knowledge! Do you wish this?'

'Yes!' came several voices.

'Then it shall be yours,' said the Saviour. 'Tonight we travel through these tunnels to a secret, sacred place. From there we take ship off world to begin a pilgrimage of many months. I cannot lie to you, not all shall survive its rigours. But for those who do, the better place awaits, the realm of the Crimson King. A chance to become part of his grand and wondrous designs.'

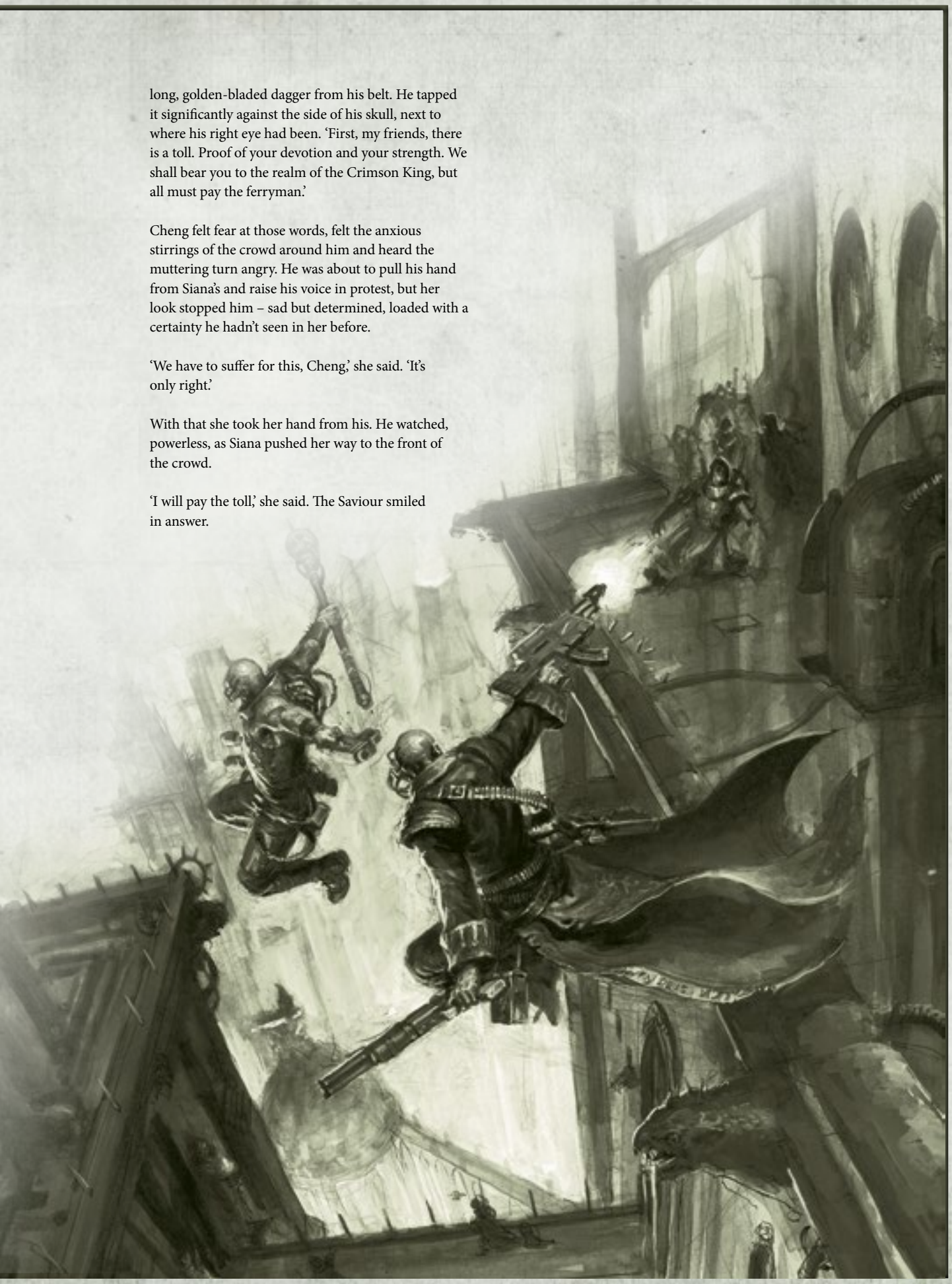
Cheng felt Siana squeeze his hand. She smiled at him and it almost broke his heart to see the hope in her eyes. He felt the thing inside him coil and stir, and he pushed it back down with effort. *We're getting out of this damned place*, he thought, trepidation and hope warring within him.

'In but a moment we shall be on our way, for time is not our ally,' said the Saviour, and with that he drew a

long, golden-bladed dagger from his belt. He tapped it significantly against the side of his skull, next to where his right eye had been. 'First, my friends, there is a toll. Proof of your devotion and your strength. We shall bear you to the realm of the Crimson King, but all must pay the ferryman.'

Cheng felt fear at those words, felt the anxious stirrings of the crowd around him and heard the muttering turn angry. He was about to pull his hand from Siana's and raise his voice in protest, but her look stopped him – sad but determined, loaded with a certainty he hadn't seen in her before.

'We have to suffer for this, Cheng,' she said. 'It's only right.'

With that she took her hand from his. He watched, powerless, as Siana pushed her way to the front of the crowd.

'I will pay the toll,' she said. The Saviour smiled in answer.