Quatio awoke like it was any other day. The sun shone lazily through the dormitory window in the fiery brilliance of an exquisite sunrise, revealing his sleeping brothers. Careful to not invoke their ire, he quietly slipped off of his cot and quickly ran his feet into his sandals.

He opened the dormitorium door and vanished into the adjoining corridor. His feet made slapping sounds on the road stones as he walked towards the keep’s wall. Shadows from the just rising sun played off the inner keep’s wall, revealing the full expanse of circular fortress, and further on, just visible at the end of the passageway, the front gate.

There were no sounds except his own. And the absence of other people in the normally bustling garrison confused him. He emerged into the courtyard to be hit by a sudden brilliance of red light. It was not the sunrise he quickly realized as he stared over the assembled heads of thousands of guards, fully equipped, solemnly patrolling the outer wall.

A sudden fear over took him as he realized what day it was. He slowly gazed around him at the shimmering red thick light that ran across the land and followed its source to the object above him.

A small circle hovered unmoving in front of the sun, corrupting the light. Although he knew it was wrong, his eyes were drawn to the object. It shimmered in the light’s brilliance and seemed to cast off waves which cascaded down to the earth suffusing everything and everyone in its presence.

He stared closer, the red body wavering and shifting before his eyes, a small black dot appearing at the focal point of his vision. The world became a tunnel with only one exit, everything else dropping away into shifting globs of darkness and seething shadow; there was only the object.

He felt himself begin to become nauseous as his eyes locked, unable to avert their gaze from the alien form. He began to tremble, his small body wracked with tremors, and he began to drool uncontrollably as whispers in a primal language began to slip into his ears.

He barely felt the arms wrap themselves around his waist, lifting him off his feet.

He remembered a shifting field of vision as shapes played themselves across mind like a chaotic array of swirling water as his body moved not of its own accord through half remembered halls and gates of iron. Calm sturdy strides carried him and strong arms gripped his torso, never letting any part of him drag on the pavers.

A familiar smell hit his nose, the char of a burning fire and the distinctive soot of the smithy.

“So the sleep-drought wore off huh.” The giant said from above him as the force deposited him somewhat roughly onto a chair. “Always knew you were a stout lad, even giving your size.”

Quantio stared at his small hands and stick like arms, but they appeared foreign to him as if they belonged to another person. He suddenly lost control of his muscles and started to slide out of the chair.

“Oh no you don’t.” The man said in a gruff voice, and buffeted him rightways. “Got a good look at it didn’t you? That’s a lesson. You should know better; stories and all. Here, this should help.”

An icy cold bucket of water quickly impacted with his chest, pushing his scrawny body back into the wooden chair. The giant now stooped over, backlit from the massive fire behind him.

Quantio recognized the man, as he started to shiver. Master Smith Senis pushed him towards the fire, illuminating himself in the process.

The man was very old, at least seventy or eighty cycles if the rumors around the dormitorium were true. A wizened, wrinkled, gaunt face with bushy white eyebrows. White hair adorned his head on the parts that still had it but his face belied a cold strength visible perhaps only through his steely blue eyes.

Master Senis had he strength of ten men, it was said, and the endurance of twenty. Perhaps these were changed wrought by the man’s Oath, a simple and powerful one, which simply said “I am a smith”. Senis seemed more than a man and Quantio could remember when his soft but firm voice had rung out over the Assembly on the days he was allowed to see the proceedings. However, the Assembly was louder now, with more people speaking than those that heeded to listen. Too loud it seemed for an old man and his soft voice.

“Galanor and its fortress lives in the only gap between the two halves of the Wall, and their peaks forbid enemies, and even the wind. Thus, the Paladin City of Galanor takes the brunt of both of these attacks. Its walls are tall and strong, and so too have grown the people.” Senis quoted from memory some book.

“But I fear some of these strong people have grown a little too tall. Giants, they think of themselves, behind their giant walls, with perhaps only their noses peering down through the clouds.”

Quantio started to smile at the old man’s addition to the quote.

“They didn’t listen.” Senis said off handedly. “I’m sure you saw the guards on the wall. The gates are closed. Those fools care more about their well being and military power than the lives of the people who they are supposed to protect.” The old man said quietly, throwing off the one decorative outer cloak he had to the butt end of a pole arm lying against the wall. Quantio’s smile vanished and he leaned forward in his chair.

“One even had the courage to laugh at my urges to use the garrison to secure the outer town. The others admonished him, but it was clear the same thoughts were going through their heads. And who could blame them? What better time for the enemy to attack then the Day of Blood?”

Senis suddenly grew quiet and Quantio followed the old man’s gaze to the opened window.

“Close that,” He said, while getting up. “And lock it too. You and I have important work to do. Much more important than that blasted Asssembly. Go!” He barked suddenly.

Quantio, now ahold of his senses, bolted for the window and fumbled at the latch, careful not to gaze out into the alien visage of red.

The shutter slammed close and Quantio slid the bolt on it.

He saw Senis do the same with the door, only with a much more massive bolt, one made of iron.

Quantio turned to the thing eating up much of the room, the sunken depression in front of the furnace which housed the Artificer’s Anvil. Grossly disproportionate to a man’s size, the anvil was a relic of ancient times, but nothing Quantio could see about the device indicated that it was so. It looked like an ordinary anvil, besides its absurd dimensions.

Senis heaved on the bellows, stirring the once pacific fire to snapping life, a swirl of orange red sucked up the chimney. The coals burned hot. He checked the water system also, another reminder of earlier times, when the Everstream filled the city with clear and cold fountains and pools. But walls could not have pipes, and fountains and pools did not feed people. Most of its waters were diverted for farming irrigation next to the outer town. They had kept the rivulet that ran to the smithy though. Fires were a constant concern.

Senis heaved a bundle Quantio had not seen him carry onto a table near the furnace. The pieces inside made the unmistakable ringing thunk of raw metal.

“What are you making?” Quantio asked, now curious, hoping to forget the situation outside and the earlier events.

“A sword for the Consul himself.” Senis said, his eyes full of life again.

He whipped off the cloth covering and Quanio gasped.

“The purist iron I have ever seen.” Senis agreed. But then he pulled the boy close, chair and all, until has sat very close to the old man.

“You are going to help me make a sword the likes of which has never been seen in centuries. I know the way, and this anvil…” he paused, gesturing to the anvil, “this anvil will help. A sword from generation to generation…” he said to himself, gathering the tools he would need.

“You’ll be working the bellows. Do not stop unless I explicitly tell you so, regardless of what you see me do, or how tired you are.” Senis ordered. Quantio, blushed with shame. His stick like body was ill-suited for smithing, and his strength had given out on many occasions, leaving the old man to finish the work himself. “No, Master.” Quantio assured him.

He would not fail him this time. Not during a sword for the Consul. It might be the last straw for him. Orphans like himself were usually quickly picked up into the city guard or expeditionary forces. It was only the Senis’s voice, and his need for an apprentice that had spared Quantio of what would have been mostly likely a very short life.

“Good.” Senis stated, back now turned to Quantio. “Let us begin”

An hour had gone by, and Quantio thought he could feel the beginnings of fatigue setting in as he pumped the massive wind device. But his thoughts were cut short by a sudden scream from outside.

“It is the Day in Red.” Senis spoke, without looking up from his work. The hammer hitting the metal again and again. “Pay no attention to what you hear outside, for I assure you, it will get much worse. Pay attention to what I do. That is what is important here.”

And Quantio did. The shape of a sword was not quite present from the raw bar that glowed now in the embers of the fire, held in place by Senis’s tongs. “The metal is superb. I do not know where he found it actually, but I purchased it off of a high climber who said he saw it in a cave, just lying there. I doubt that very much, but regardless, there are very few flaws in this piece of metal. But I am going to make sure there are *none*.” He said accenting the last three words with impacts of his hammer.

Impact, turn, impact, impact impact, turn, serveral more impacts. The dance between the smith and his creation continued. Quantio was sure they had been going now for multiple hours.

“Take a break.” It was an order. Not a suggestion. Senis hadn’t even looked behind him to see Quantio weezing by the bellows.

A massive forearm reached back and grabbed the handle, and pumped.

“I will need you later. For now observe.” Quantio did so without any remark. He swore he still felt the lashings from when he had argued with the old man.

Almost as tall as he was, he had to stand at the edge of the depression in order to see the Master’s skill. And skill it was. The hammer strokes folded the metal into itself again and again, the protosword gleamed on the black anvil with its own fire within it as the hammer descended on it.

The sound of marching boots came through the floor from outside the smithy, and when Quantio listened he heard yells and once or twice, the clash of metal against metal. But they came through only as muffled voices from another world, scattered by even hammer strike and subdued by the shutters, of which Quantio was now infinitely glad.

The sword was now starting to take shape, it was a hand and a half, and Quantio could tell that it would be a superb weapon, perhaps better than any he had seen the Master make.

However, before the weapon was finished, Senis took up a filthy piece of pig iron and showed it to Quantio.

“This” he said, “is the second piece.” And smiled a little.

“Master, I know you must know this, but that metal is worthless. Why include it in such a perfect sword?” Quantio said, unable to keep his thoughts from pouring forth.

The pristine sword now lay cooling on the black anvil, and Quantio was sure that it was almost complete. The inclusion of such a piece not only didn’t make sense, it would surely result in an inferior blade.

Senis merely shook his head. “You are right. And yet you are wrong. This is where you then start to learn.” He ushered the boy closer to the anvil. “If this were a ordinary anvil, I would never include such a piece and your instincts tell me you have the intuition I tried to teach you.”

“But this is not an ordinary anvil. This is the Artificer’s Anvil and it itself was created in a time of Chaos and Magic.”

The word was like a myth in and of itself. Magic was the boasts of school children, the curses of fools and the knowledge of now fewer and fewer historians. Quantio leaned in closer.

“And like the Chaos it came from, this anvil despises order. The distinctive blades of the guard and army are made here, but only through my skill as a smith. This anvil loves to twist and change, rearrange and confound. The first time I saw it was only in my last year as an apprentice myself, so I doubt you would notice its subtle effects.”

“But here is the trick, and it sounds simple, but the human mind edges towards patterns and the familiar; you must introduce the chaos. Make something wild and foreign. Work with the anvil’s affects, but never let it guide your hand, for you must remain the master of your own work.”

Quantio nodded, scarcely believing his ears. Senis had never told him anything like this before.

The two bars emerged from the furnace where they had sat for too long. The shape of the sword was almost gone, melted away into nothing. And the crude metal of the pig iron now infused with the original raw metal.

Senis took the stuck together objects out, and started hammering again.

Quantio watched as the swirls of the two metals enveloped each other, their frozen embrace coming closer and closer with each hammer stroke. The two bars now were completely one, lying on top of one another.

An endless progression of hammer strokes, occasionally interspersed with other tools moulded the metal, and with every flip Quantio could see that the blade would have two sides, not clearly distinguishable from first observation, but on a closer look a trained eye would notice a separation between the two sides: one a higher amount of pure iron, the other, a higher amount of the lesser metal.

However, this separation was not a clear line. Senis had taken advantage of the semi-liquidness of the metals and the dimensionality of the sword itself, as the two metals were inseparable from one another, swirling both around and into each other in every way, covering the sword with a nauseating dichotomy of spirals and subductions.

“These patterns will be almost invisible once the sword is complete and the anvil will assure that the sword is unmatched by any of my creations. It has received its chaos.” Senis said, finishing the last touches.

“Perhaps in more ways than one.” He noted, suddenly hearing something. He barked at Quantio to hold the sword at a specific distance from the fire as it cooled and to turn it in a specific fashion.

The old man unlatched the window and to Quantio’s horror, threw open the shutters.

Fire raged in the outer town, the screams of men and animals filled Quantio’s ears. From their position, on the small fortress hill, he could see small people moving beyond the walls. There seemed to be no reason to their movements though. No organized resistance to the conflagration which was now reaching the edge of the fields.

Quantio barely made out two men struggling with each other. One of them got up. The other did not. It was clear that the guards were being attacked too, even on their walls, perhaps out of desperation.

Every once and a while one of them would fall back off the parapet and lie still in the browned grass below.

“As I thought.” Senis said, turning from the window but not closing it. “It is dusk on the Day of Blood. This is a time of madness.”

“Quantio” The old man said sharply, noticing the boy drawing back in increasing horror form the window. “This is our world. This is what it means to live in it. We cannot free ourselves from this day just like we cannot free ourselves, from pestilence, hunger or death. But we can make our Oaths, and I will fulfill mine. Man the bellows, and do not stop until I tell you.”

Quantio felt like the wind had been driven out of him. First the event in the morning, then the Master’s talk of magic, and now…chaos in the streets, a fire destroying lives, perhaps more than one fire, coursing through men as much as wood and burning both. It defied comprehension.

But nothing could prepare Quantio for what his master was about to do next. A strong hand encompassed his, closing a manacle over his wrist, and attaching the other end to a metal loop on the handle of the bellows.

“I am sorry.” Senis said. “This will be as much a blessing as it will be a curse.”

The man then took the completed patterned sword and quenched it in the cold clear water of the Everspring. Then he took the blade and carefully sliced into both his wrists. Blood spurted from the arteries, but Senis took the now ice cold blade and, grabbing its length in both hands, angled his arms so that the blood would flow onto it.

“Master! What are you?!” Quantio cried out, starting to feel the nausea returning quickly. Nothing made sense.

“Now you see why I chained you. This is one of many lessons today then Quantio. The Over Oath binds us all, and our individual Oaths stem from its power. Sometimes the strength in this world is not some astrological body, or ancient artifacts, or even military might.” The old man said, staring straight at the boy, deep into Quantio’s eyes, completely disregarding his terror.

“Through the Oath, the Ancient Ones gave us another way. Through sacrifice, even the most mortal of men can find unimaginable power.”

Senis stuck both the blade and his hands into the fire.

“And with the powers of the past and the present, I name this sword Janus!” He declared with a voice now not soft at all.

Somewhere around this time, Quantio lost track of his memories. Scattered thoughts in his head, fragments and shards remembered the sound of men and women dying behind him as they killed one another for no reason, the screams of children and infants as they were tossed into the fire. They remembered the yells of the soldiers as they opened fire on the masses surging against the gates, threatening to break in. He remembered the anguish of his Master, as the flames ran around his scalding hands, and the very blood within his veins burned, the smell of burning flesh mixed with the smell of burning metal. All of this, blanketed in the alien and inescapable red light of the object above him.

He remembered the contents of his stomach exiting themselves all across his body and the bellows, and the stale stench of urine when he could no longer control himself. Covered with these things, Quantio stood for the duration of the psychotic fever dream that was the night. Forcing the bellows up and down. Continuously. Never stopping. Up and down. Up and down. Feeding the flames that ran along his Master’s hands. Up and down. Up and down. Knowing that he could not stop, for it was the one order Senis had given him before everything had descended into madness. Up and down. Knowing that he could not stop because it was the last vestige of sanity, the last action that seemed connected to the reasonable world he once knew and inhabited.

Senis had, in the morning freed Quantio, who apparently was still manning the bellows. He had not stopped throughout the entire night, and was covered with tears and much worse. He had not responded when the old man had set him free.

Senis, whose hands, by the strength of his Oath survived the ordeal with only severe burns, rather than completely disintegrating, as what should have happened. And although the pain had crippled something in his mind, or destroyed it completely, and although he never quite recovered from that night, dying only a year later in his bed, he retained the consciousness necessary to free Quantio, clean him, and return him to his bed in the dormitorium.

The sword Janus was beyond words. Stories say even the High Guardian himself traveled all the way from the capitol to behold its splendor. It was the Jewel of Galantor and would remain so until the Consul died one day during a routine skirmish with the barbarian horde. His son took possession of the sword, disbanded the Assembly, made a throne and named himself Princept and has ruled ever since.