



THE CRATER

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A NOSTONE UNIVERSE STANDALONE

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SAMPLE · CHAPTER ONE

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CHAPTER 1: IN-PROCESSING

THE RAYS OF THE THIRD FURY BEAT DOWN ON CONRAD. HOTTER than he ever remembered, and getting worse as the transport dropped toward the landing zone. The flight had taken an hour. It felt like he had been roasting on a spit for the better part of a day. Time had lost all meaning.

Just days ago his mind had been racing wildly at the future. Now the only thing he could think about was the heat. Sweat beaded and ran off the stainless steel collar around his neck.

The collar had gone on at the second processing station, days ago now. A fitting bench, a technician who never once looked at his face, a cold ring of steel levered shut with a click he had felt in his teeth. The station after that had taken the ankle. A local jab, a bored voice telling him to hold still, and everything his grandmother had ever saved came out of his leg in less time than it takes to strip a bolt. They dropped the technic into a tray like a pulled nail. The limp came free of charge.

The last station had no bench and no technician. Just a holding pen and a voice off a speaker, recorded long ago by a man who had sounded bored of it even then, reading the rules of the Crater to each batch in turn.

There were three.

Your collar is registered to your cell. When the lights flash, you have one day to be in that cell. When lockdown falls, you will be in it.

New arrivals follow the Abomination. Do not fall behind.

Meet quota.

Conrad had stood in that pen with a dozen collared men and women and waited for the rest. The rest never came. There was no rule against theft, none against murder, nothing about what the people around him could or could not do to him. Three rules, and not one of them was for his protection. That told him more about where he was going than every myth he had ever heard.

The one he had heard most was Vase's version, told at least monthly at the counter of the pub under his flat. In it, the Crater was not a prison at all but a proving ground, and the Government watched every inmate in it through a paid channel on the feeds, and once a year the last hundred standing got pardons and a drop apiece. Vase swore his cousin's crewmate had gone in a thief and come out a rich man with a Government pension. The story had a hundred holes and everyone poured it another drink anyway. Standing in the pen, Conrad finally saw the real flaw in it, and it was not the pension. It was that the story assumed somebody, somewhere, was watching. Three rules and a recorded voice said no one was.

He had walked into the in-processing room a person. He had walked out of it a number with a collar.

Now Conrad sat with the other numbers on a flat metal bench, heads down. No one made eye contact. No one spoke. There was no rule that enforced the silence. They kept it anyway. The unwritten ones were the only rules that had ever run a place like this, and anyone with common sense could read this one straight off the room. Eyes down, mouth shut.

Even with every head down, the benches read like a docket. Directly across sat a mountain of a man with Juggernaut ink climbing his neck and a row of emptied sockets running each forearm, where the strength he had been famous for had been unscrewed and carried away. Beside him a man

near Conrad's own age kept touching the fresh dressing behind his ear like a tongue probing a missing tooth. At the bench's end, an old-timer's hands would not stop trembling, and whether that was fear or just the absence of some steadying technic, Conrad could not have said.

Twelve lives, read off hands and necks alone. Conrad wondered what his own hands gave away.

The grays they had all been issued were coarse as sacking, cut for no one, and dyed the exact color of the walls, as if the place meant to absorb them in advance.

The engines roared as the transport began its descent. The drop pressed Conrad's stomach up into his throat. There was no pilot aboard to care what the maneuver did to its passengers.

Under the engine noise he could hear one other sound, the ticking metronome of the mechanical demon that stood between him and the long drop to freedom. Its eyes were the only color in the hold, two coals of red that never dimmed and never wandered. Perhaps the drop was the better fate. Conrad gave it honest consideration.

Between the heat of the Fury, the eighteen kilos of jewelry that made every swallow a labor, and the dead stare of the thing by the door, Conrad's idea of bliss had shrunk to anything that merely hurt.

As the transport banked hard, Conrad caught his destination through the open doorway, a side glance only. He did not dare turn his whole head toward the thing standing there. But he caught the view.

The Crater. The myth was now reality.

Gone was the neon glow of Metro, the crowded streets, the glass towers, the advertisements stacked to the sky. Gone were the smells of the street vendors and the calls of the night trade working the corners.

If he could have kept a single one of them, it would have been the smell from the craw stall three doors down from his flat, chili oil and river salt going since before dawn. He had eaten there a hundred times without once

calling it precious. That was the trick of a life. You never knew which ordinary thing was the one you would want back.

The trip itself said something too. They had been in the air for hours, far longer than Conrad had known a transport to stay up for anything, Metro somewhere over the curve of the world behind them. Wherever the Government had built this place, it had wanted it far from everything, and it had gotten its wish.

What lay below was a desolate plain of sand, empty of anything alive, heat standing off the pan in slow silver waves. A crater gaped in the planet's crust, far deeper than it was wide, and out of it rose a massive industrial structure, gantries and hoist towers and trusswork in metal gone the brown-black of old scorch.

There was no other transport in the sky. Not one. The rumors made this a production site, the works that fed a whole planet, and Conrad had expected traffic, haulers stacked up in a queue, running lights, something. The air over it was as empty as the sand around it. As the transport drew closer, Conrad picked out black specks moving on the platforms. They could only be one thing. Abominations.

The same breed as the one standing over him now. More of them than he had seen in his whole life, and more than anyone would care to see in a hundred.

The facility was unlike any prison or manufacturing plant he had ever seen. No exhaust from any heavy production, and no fence line to keep anyone in or out. It was a tower, was all. A single industrial tower standing in a hole that had no bottom, and the part of it above the sand was the smallest part of it by far.

And it was his new home.

Above it all, the sky was staging the only show it knew. All three Furies stood in it at once, as they did at the height of summer, three coals sharing the same orange-red burn at their three different distances. The Third hung nearest, nearest of all of them by the solar calendar, and hottest, which

Conrad's neck had known since dawn without any need of the astronomy. And across the washed-out blue, faint as two thumbprints, a pair of silver moons stared down.

Five of them up there at once, at this hour, at this angle. A sky fit for the space teleseries, for the moment where somebody looks up and says something worth remembering. Conrad looked up and had nothing.

This was Synthara.

The transport never touched the sand. It slid out over the rim and dropped, and the daylight went with it.

Rock on the left. Steel on the right. A hundred meters of nothing in between, and the transport threading it like a needle. The rock ran past raw and unbroken, as the planet had left it. The steel ran past in decks and lit slots and machinery Conrad had no name for, and it never once reached across to touch the wall. Whatever held that building up, it held it up alone.

They set down a few hundred meters below the rim, on a platform hung off the building's flank with nothing under it at all. The Fury still found him there, a hard white bar of it coming down through the mouth of the crater, lighting maybe a tenth of what lay beneath. Past the platform's edge the gap kept going. It went down and down and gave nothing back.

Somewhere under his boots were four and a half kilometers of it. He tried not to do that math and did it anyway.

From a distance it had been massive. From the platform it was insurmountable.

The Abomination stepped off the transport without a wasted motion. The whole craft bucked from the sudden loss of weight, hard enough that people lost their footing.

No signal was given. The inmate nearest the door simply disembarked, and the line of freshly processed prisoners followed. Conrad looked up, and for a moment met the lavender eyes of an old man. The man flashed him a smile. It surprised Conrad enough that he blinked against the sweat pooling

in his eyes, and by the time he had blinked it clear the smile was gone, faster than it had arrived. As if he had imagined the whole thing.

But the instructions at the last processing station had been explicit. Follow the AB. Don't fall behind. Conrad didn't lament. When the queue came to him, he came off the transport.

He was the last one down, walking single file like he was back in grade school. Except this wasn't the beginning of a new chapter. It was the end of his last one.

As on the transport, no one reminded them to keep their heads down and stay in line. Conrad had seen what happened to those who needed reminding. Those individuals were no longer bound for the Crater. They were on another plane of existence altogether.

Conrad wasn't a spiritual man, but they say you'll find a Fury to worship at the end, one way or another. He was feeling the truth of it. It was the only way to make peace with how he had ended up in a place like this.

He followed the collar in front of him. It belonged to the old man, the one he thought had smiled. Seventy at least, from the matted gray hair and beard and the frailty in his features, the issue grays hanging off him like laundry on a line. Conrad wondered what a life had to do to a man to deliver him here at that age.

Because apart from the age and the disheveled look, the man didn't belong anywhere near a facility like this. From behind, he was unmistakably bare of technic scarring.

Not even behind the ear. That was the tell everyone carried. Everyone had at least that one. Conrad had never in his life seen a person past the age of five who was clean. No clan tattoos either. The man was as much a myth as the Crater itself.

But what could anyone really read off the back of a head?

Not that Conrad could talk. He was missing fingers, and he walked with a permanent limp where they had cut the chunk out of his ankle at processing, along with the technic that had let him walk. He might have

been the old man's junior by fifty years. Going by their two bodies, he was the older one.

Conrad kept the best pace he could to hold his place in line. He had known he was last since the platform. The sound confirmed it with every step anyway, a mechanical pounding that came up through the deck plate before it ever reached his ears. An AB, walking right behind him.

He dared not slow down, though every step cost him dearly.

This was the Crater. Any slip would be the end of him.

Metro was busy and Metro made sure you knew it. The hustle there happened out loud and in the street, at every hour there was. The Crater was busier than Metro had ever been, and from the outside it gave back nothing at all. No traffic in the sky. No crews on the sand. No smoke, no noise, no sign that anything in it had moved since the planet cooled. Whatever this place did, it did underneath. That was the myth that turned out to be true. This was the manufacturing site of all Steam on the planet, owned and operated by the Government and its cronies.

The Government didn't trouble itself to enforce many laws. The logistics network of Steam was the sacred exception. Even Conrad wasn't dumb enough to get sent here for that.

No. He was here for a crime as common as the grains of sand outside.

He had stolen scrap from a local technician shop. He'd done it a dozen times before, often enough that he believed the owner knew and simply pitied him.

None of that mattered. A crime was a crime, and he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The wrong place happened to be his home district. The wrong time happened to be an AB on patrol.

A venting AB. He had seen them maybe a handful of times in his life. Never once in his district.

Why? Why? He had asked the question a million times between that moment and this one.

When he saw it, his hand had gone to the Steam he carried. One drop. The most valuable thing to his name, three years in the saving, and he broke the seal on it in the doorway of his own building without ever deciding to.

It went in cold and came up hot. Every pathway in him lit at once, all of them together, and the street sharpened until he could count the rivets on the machine's shoulder from thirty meters. His ankle stopped mattering. His hands went still. For one moment Conrad was more than he had ever been in his life, and every road off that street stood open to him, and all he had to do was pick one and go.

He turned to run.

He did not run.

The courage had not come in the bottle. It was not in there, and it never had been. He stood in his own doorway, faster and stronger than he would ever be again, and he froze, because what could any of it possibly matter against an AB. A minute went by. Maybe less.

Then the power went out of him as fast as it had arrived, and left him standing exactly where it had found him.

The AB never even stepped toward him.

Government cronies got him instead, on him inside a minute. They stopped him for possession, read some slag about rights, and charged him with the scrap in the end, because possession wants something to possess and he had already burned his. On paper Conrad went to the Crater over less than a hundred bits' worth of another man's metal.

The arrest he could replay to the frame. Two cronies, armor still cool from the floater, and a scanner wand that ran the length of him twice and came back clean, because there was nothing left on him to find. He had watched the nearer one's face while it read, the small sag of a man losing the arrest he had come out for. Then the other one opened his bag, and there was the scrap, and that was the thread they pulled instead. Both of them had gone very calm after that, in a manner he understood immediately and completely. Up and down the street, doors had opened. His neighbors stood

in them, the noodle man, the woman who resold cable, the kids who ran his stairwell, and every one of them watched, and not one of them moved. He did not blame them then and did not blame them now. That was the street's whole law: you watch, you remember, you do not step in. He had stood in those doorways himself, more times than he wanted to count, watching some other poor slag get folded into a floater. It had never once occurred to him that the doorways were rehearsal for the street.

Days later, at the hearing, he still couldn't believe the sentence when it came down. Three months in the Crater. It made no sense. There were so many other places to ship a man like him.

The hearing itself had taken less time than the queue outside it. No advocate. He had asked, once, and the clerk had looked at him as if he had requested a pet. The whole proceeding was one man behind a desk reading off a slate in a flat voice, case number, charge, article, sentence, next. A feeds lens hung from the ceiling on a jointed arm, its light steady red, recording him for whatever channel bought sentencing footage in bulk. Conrad had stood on a painted square, because there was a painted square, worn gray in the middle where a few thousand pairs of boots had stood before his. The clerk never once said his name. The slate said it for him, and the slate was the only thing in the room with any authority, and the man reading it was just the nozzle it came out of. Ninety seconds, maybe less. Then a door on the far side, and the next case number called before that door had finished closing behind him.

Furies, five years in a maximum security Metro prison would have been preferable. Nobody went into the Crater for slag like this. And nobody came back out of it either. Three months, thirty years, it made no difference which number the slate read, because nobody had ever finished one. The sentence was a formality. A man went in, and that was the last anyone ever saw of him.

It was some corporate slag drawing. One of those twisted culling-game fantasies the Government steam-huffers found entertaining, a way to thin

out random poors and watch them go.

Conrad had no clan. He was a poor street kid who had been scraping by since the day he arrived in this Fury-scorched world. Everyone he'd ever known who got caught up with a clan got iced. Only two things carried a person anywhere in this life: technics and Steam.

All of it rang in his head as he droned past the ABs posted along the platform, one soulless silhouette after another. Two and a half meters tall. Two hundred seventy kilos or better. Humanoid was the shape and nothing else. Matte black plating over a long hard frame, arms hanging past the knee, shoulders squared wider than any man's, a waist narrow enough to make all that reach look intentional. The head kept a man's shape and nothing of a man's face, smooth all the way around, no mouth, no nose, not so much as a seam. Two circular red eyes sat where eyes belonged, and they never blinked.

The Government didn't need the rule of law with these things roaming. In Metro he had glimpsed them only rarely, and almost always near Steam. The most valuable resource on the planet.

Steam was the economy of this world, full stop. And every drop of it was produced here, in the Crater.

His own drop had taken him three years to put together, bit by bit, skimmed off jobs that barely fed him. The night he bought it, in an alley off the eleventh's market row, the seller had cracked the case for exactly two seconds, and that neon glow had lit both their faces and the wet wall behind them, and every rule of the transaction was already understood. You did not hold it up. You did not let it glow in the open. You carried it against the skin, wrapped, where a brush in a crowd would not find it, and you never told a soul you had it, not a lover, not a mother. One drop was a year's rent on his flat. One drop was a mid-grade technic installed clean, with a warranty. One drop settled the sort of debt that otherwise settled you. People in the eleventh did not spend their drop. They held it. A man with a drop was a man with one door out of anything, and you only got to open that door

once. Conrad had opened his. It had bought him one minute, and he had spent that minute standing still.

Once upon a time, Conrad had dreamed of having all the Steam he could ever want. Here was his dream coming true, in the most sadistic way possible.

He stepped through the facility's massive mechanical door, and the red burn of the Fury faded off his skin.

It was the last time he would feel the burn of a Fury. The last time he would catch the glint of two full moons in a night sky. The last time he would so much as dream about Steam.

But it was not the last time Steam would run in his veins.

At the bottom of that dark waited the true power of this world. Conrad was going to learn what it was. It would cost him everything he had left.

It would be worth it.

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