

WARHAMMER
40,000

DAN ABNETT



RAVENOR
THE OMNIBUS

A WARHAMMER 40,000 OMNIBUS

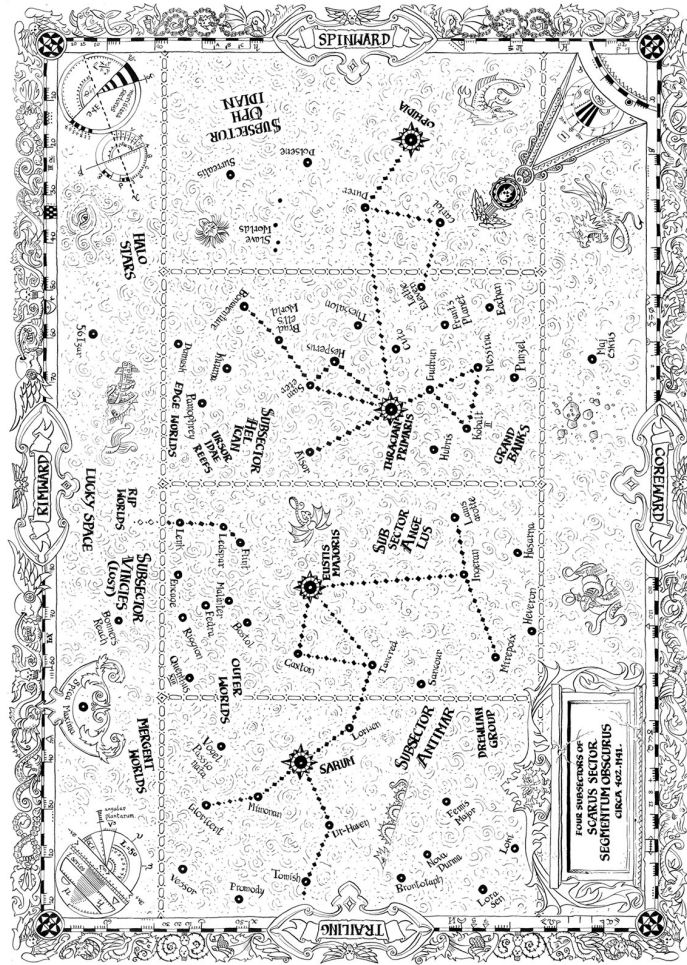
RAVENOR

Dan Abnett

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IT IS THE 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

YET EVEN IN his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperors will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst

His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

TO BE A man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

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RAVENOR

The great procession of the triumph passed under the Spatian Gate, and I marched with it, into the atrocity. That ceremonial arch, so splendid and massive, forms a threshold in the course of my life. I stepped across it and was remade, transmuted from one form into another.

Some have said that I was crippled beyond the measure of a man. I do not see it that way.

I believe I was liberated.

— Gideon Ravenor, preface to *The Mirror of Smoke*



THEN

Local summer time, Southern landmass, Zenta Malhyde, 397.M41

HE WAS SLEEPING in his habitent when the cries of the indigens woke him.

‘Ekoh! Ekoh! N’nsa skte me’du!’

He sat up fast, sweat streaking down his bare torso. He’d been dreaming about the Vents of Sleef. *Always the drop, the long drop into the bowels of hell...*

‘Ekoh! H’ende! N’nsa skte me’du!’

His Cognitae-trained mind fumbled for a translation. That damned indigen argot. ‘Ekoh’... that was *pay heed* or *great news*, and ‘h’ende’ was a formal title he was fast getting used to. The rest? ‘Nsa skt’... that was a verb form. Parse it, for Throne’s sake... *finding of a thing, I find, he/she/it finds, we find...*

Great gods of nowhere!

He scrambled to his feet, naked, and reached for his bodyglove, which hung like a sloughed lizard skin over the back of the trestle chair. Ambient temp was already high in the forties, and the habitent’s viropump was struggling to breathe cool air into the unlit prefab.

The door-flap of the habitent drew back and the awful, prickling heat rushed in. Kyband came with it. His long black hair was lank with sweat, and the corners of his eyes and mouth were raw where he had taken too long to scrape out nte-fly eggs.

‘Get dressed, Zyg,’ Kyband said. Despite the weeping redness, his eyes were bright. ‘The little bastards have cracked it.’

OUTSIDE, THE SHOCKING heat made him gasp despite himself. The indigens were thronging around the camp's habitents, chattering excitedly and waving their dirty fingers at the sky. Nung the ogryn had to drive them back with a lash. Kyband went to get his weapon, slapping flies away from his face.

Molotch fastened up his bodyglove. Just ten seconds in the open heat and already his sweat was pouring out inside its rubberised sheath. He set a straw hat on his head. 'Where?' he asked. 'Site C,' said Kyband.

It was only a ten-minute walk from the camp, but every step was an effort. Molotch quickly realised he'd left his glare-shades back in the tent. His eyes began to ache and tear up in the intense sunlight. The day glare seared white against the powder rock and glinted mercilessly off the shiny, ink-black cups and tubes of the fleshy vegetation.

The indigens ran around and ahead of them, urging them along, their scrawny, tanned bodies indifferent to the frying heat.

'Site C, eh?' Molotch panted. 'And there was I putting money on D. Who'd have thought it?'

'Not Nung,' said Nung, though, in fairness, there were very few things he ever thought of all by himself.

Through one last glade of stinking black tubers and they came out into the hard shadows of the pillars. Formed of white crystal, the pillars rose as high as thirty metres, like the columns of some lost temple. Boros Dias had assured Molotch they were an entirely natural geo-form. The treacherous pathway wound between the pillars all the way down to the cliff face. Their feet – particularly the bare feet of the scampering indigens – kicked up sheets of white dust from the path. The clouds made Molotch and Kyband cough and spit. Nung appeared untroubled. The ogryn displayed a remarkable resilience to physical discomfort. A nte-egg infestation had swollen and necrotised the flesh of his face from behind his left ear to his eye-line, and even that didn't seem to bother him.

At site C, the servitor-excavators had dug out a whole section of the grainy white cliff-face, and Nung had personally used a flamer to torch

away the last of the overhanging growth. A ragged cleft had been exposed in the facing. Two weeks' worth of back-breaking labour by the indigens had cleared the cleft of rubble and revealed it.

Lynta was standing guard by the opening.

The shouting from the indigens grew louder and Molotch turned to Kyband.

'This requires privacy,' he said.

Kyband nodded. He pulled the bolt pistol from his belt holster and held it up. It had taken them a while to learn, but the indigens now understood what it did. They fled in terror, every last one of them, their triumphant whoops turning into hasty yelps.

The site fell silent but for the gurgle of sap, the whistle of insects and the buzzing crackle of the sun.

'Lynta?'

She walked over to them, mopping perspiration from her brow. Her bodyglove was set to max-chill, and rapidly thawing frost was fuming off her lean figure.

'The doc says we have it at last, h'ende,' she said.

'Don't call me that. It makes you sound like a heathen.'

Lynta smiled. 'We're all heathens, aren't we, Zygmunt?'

'After this, Lynta, we'll all be gods,' he replied and turned his body sideways to slide in through the narrow cleft. 'Zygmunt?' she called out, halting him.

'What?'

'When are you going to tell us? When are you going to tell us what it is you and the doc are after here? Me and Kyband... the rest... we deserve to know.'

Molotch looked into her bright green eyes. They were murder-hard. He knew she was right. Purchased loyalty would only stretch so far.

'Soon,' he said and wriggled into the cleft. Boros Dias was twenty metres inside, in the darkness, and he was caked in dust. He was instructing two

servitors about a painstaking method of excavation. Fan-units in the back of their distended necks whirled as they blew air into the crevices that Dias's light-wand illuminated. 'There you are,' said Boros Dias. 'What have you found?'

'See for yourself,' said Boros Dias. He raised his wand-beam over the ancient carvings on the semi-exposed wall. 'I see scratchings, and hollows plugged with dust,' said Molotch. 'Do what I pay you to do.'

Boros Dias sighed. Just eighteen months earlier, he had been magister tutorae xenos at the Universitariat of Thracian, one of the most admired academics in his field.

'I see certain structure forms,' he said. 'They have the corresponding vowel shapes and interrogative functions.'

'Is it Enuncia?' Molotch asked.

'I believe it is. But I would not dare try to voice any of it. Not without further study.'

Molotch pushed him aside. 'You're a coward,' he declared.

Molotch had spent five years familiarising himself with the basic vocatives and palate sounds. He ran his fingers over the bas-relief, and tried a word.

It sounded like *shhfkkt*.

The cranium of the servitor unit next to him burst in a splatter of gore, brain-matter and spinning metal fragments. Molotch's mouth began to stream with blood. The other servitor went berserk and started to beat its forehead against the far wall of the chamber. It carried on until its head smashed and came off.

Molotch staggered backwards, retching up blood. He spat out one of his own front teeth.

'I said it was too dangerous!' Boros Dias cried.

Molotch grabbed him by the throat. 'I haven't come so far, and suffered so much, to throw this away! For frig's sake, doctor! I lost eighteen good men cutting my way through that tau cadre just to be here!'

‘I think maybe the tau knew this was forbidden,’ Boros Dias ventured.

Molotch punched him in the face, knocking him onto the narrow cave’s dusty floor.

‘Know, doctor, my basic tenet is that nothing is forbidden. Zygmunt Molotch has lived his life by that philosophy.’

‘Then Zygmunt Molotch is damned,’ whimpered Boros Dias.

‘I never said I wasn’t,’ Molotch said. ‘Get on. I need some air.’

MOLOTCH PUSHED HIS way back out of the cleft into the appalling sunlight.

‘What the hell happened to you?’ Lynta asked when she saw his mouth.

‘Nothing,’ Molotch answered. Kyband and Nung stood nearby, gazing into the forest. Emmings joined them. The leathery Imperial Guard vet was cradling his trophy pulse rifle and muttering with the other two in a low voice.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘We might have company,’ Kyband said, looking round. He gestured towards the black, fleshy stalks and fronds of the surrounding jungle beyond the pillars. ‘Out there.’ Molotch followed the gesture and winced. The world was too bright to look at except through a squint.

‘Nung can smell it,’ Nung said.

‘Company? What sort of company?’ Molotch snapped.

‘Bad company,’ said Lynta, pulling out her snub-las. ‘Throne agents.’

‘The doctor needs more time,’ said Molotch. ‘Rouse everyone. We’ll deal with this.’

KYBAND VOXED THE camp and Hehteng joined them quickly. The fur on his muzzle was spiky and dank and his tongue lolled with the heat. When he spoke Low Gothic, it sounded like a scavenger snaffling at a marrowbone, but Kyband had known him long enough to get the gist.

‘Salton and Xuber are still too sick to come,’ Kyband relayed. ‘The maggots are in Salton’s gut now. He’s bleeding out.’

‘So noted,’ Molotch replied. Hehteng had brought the drone monitor handset from the camp and Molotch took it from him. He studied the little screen display. None of the sentry drones ranged around the camp area and site zones had triggered at all.

‘Seems like a false alarm,’ Molotch said. ‘But we’ll check them all by hand.’

He led them back up the baking white track between the pillars to the stinking wall of soft, black vegetation. He longed for his glare-goggles. His eyes were aching. The flare-bright sun was high in the colourless sky, and mirrorkites were turning slow circles on the thermals far overhead.

They entered the noxious miasma of the jungle. Bars of sunlight stabbed down between the glossy black tube-forms and puckered cup flowers. The rancid air was seething with nte-flies, and larger, bottle green crawlers writhed in the oozy sap of the cups or dangled from the swollen nectaries. There was a scent of gangrene.

They spread out, their boots squelching through the smaller, ground-covering tubes, bursting some and spilling their fetid juices. Molotch looked up at the canopy – a lattice of white light and black growths – and took his straw hat off to wipe a hand across his dripping scalp.

There was a flash, a whoop of superheated air, and the world tumbled over on its end.

Molotch found himself lying on his back. His face was wet. A dull, concussive numbness was in his brain, a raw ache in his right thigh. The canopy above him continued to form a lattice of light and darkness. As he watched, two incandescent bolts of las-fire, each shaped like an elongated spearhead the length of an adult human forearm, squealed overhead.

He could hear frantic shouting around him – Nung bellowing, Kyband yelling – and the throaty *boom* of a bolt pistol. Then, on top of that, the high-pitched *zap-spit* of a pulse rifle on rapid/auto.

Molotch sat up. He was spattered with root sap. There was a bloody hole the size of a bottle top through his thigh. Mulch worms and flies were already invading it.

‘Oh God-Emperor...’ he breathed. He crawled behind a fat, drooping tuber. More las-fire whined past. Several bolts punched into foliage, vomiting sprays of sap and chunks of black plant-meat. Kyband was in cover nearby, squeezing off shots with his bolt pistol. Beyond him, Emmings was hosing the forest with rapid fire from his precious pulse rifle. To Molotch’s certain knowledge, Emmings had killed forty-five men, eleven tau, twenty-three greens and five eldar. He’d accomplished that score with a battered Guard-issue long-las. Ever since he’d picked up the handsome tau weapon as spoils of combat, he’d been itching to use it.

Nung was finally making a response to pain. Like Molotch, the ogryn had been caught by the first salvo. He was bellowing, blood was squirting out of a scorched hole in his side.

Molotch struggled over to Nung’s aid, shots shrilling above his head. The ogryn was in bad shape. A secondary wound, just a glancing injury, had burst open the infested tissue of his cheek, and larval grubs were pouring out down his neck and shoulder. Molotch stuck Nung with a one-use tranq-blunt from his belt pack. ‘Come on! Come on, Nung!’ he urged. The ogryn stopped bellowing. He glanced at Molotch with an unreadable expression that might have been gratitude, and then rolled his massive bulk over onto all fours. So arranged, he shuffled over through the ooze as far as the next main tuber growth, and then unshipped the Korsh 50 assault cannon from the syn-hide boot on his back. Nung wore three heavy drum magazines from his waistbelt the way an ordinary human carried water bottles. His fat fingers fumbled to connect the belt feed.

Then he had it. The cannon shook into life, tongues of flash-fire dancing like an afterburner around the rotating multi-barrels. It roared out a great blurt of noise, undercut by the metallic grate of its cycling mechanism. A cascade of spent cases flew into the air and pattered down onto the ooze.

The cannon-blasts stripped away the vegetation before them, pulping it into matted, wet debris and a sticky mist of sap-vapour. The las-fire ceased abruptly.

‘Go!’ Molotch ordered. ‘Get to the camp!’

They all started to run, splashing and tearing through the mulch and undergrowth. Molotch couldn't see Lynta at all. Emmings was in front. He was first out into the open glare.

‘Come the frig on!’ he shouted, turning back to wave at them.

Emmings's head snapped sideways, whip-cracking his reedy neck. The shockwave travelled down his bony body and twisted it violently. Before his feet left the powder-white ground, his head began to deform, to wrench out of shape, to lose all semblance of Emmings. Then it burst, and Emmings folded like a snap-shut clasp knife. He fell sideways into the dust. Molotch glimpsed a lean figure with a bolt pistol duck back into cover behind one of the pillars. Just a glimpse, but Molotch recognised him.

That bastard interrogator, Thonius.

So, they'd found them. Thonius, his cronies – and their thrice-damned master.

Nung trampled clear of the undergrowth and peppered the nearest pillars with his cannon. Stone dust and quartz shrapnel blizzarded off them in a long, stippling line.

Molotch ran out beside him and pulled the blood-flecked pulse rifle out of Emmings's still-clenched hands.

‘Where is he?’ Lynta was behind him suddenly, her snub-las raised. ‘It was that rant-freak Thonius, wasn't it? I saw him.’

‘Over there...’ Molotch pointed.

‘Hose it!’ Lynta yelled to Nung, and started to run.

Nung loved Lynta as much as he could love anything. He obeyed without hesitation, raking the pillars again and showering the ground with spent cases. The chalky impart spume wafted up, clouds into a cloudless sky.

Lynta disappeared behind the nearest pillars. Molotch started to move again. Kyband and Hehteng emerged from the jungle.

‘The camp!’ Molotch screamed at them. ‘Nung's with me!’

Kyband and the lupen started to run up the track. Hehteng used his backward-jointed, powerful limbs to leap ahead of the human.

Molotch edged down into the pillars. It was hot and quiet again suddenly. The sun glared down, almost overhead, and he ignored his pouring sweat and the burning of his skin. He'd lost his straw hat somewhere. He moved from shadow to shadow, hugging the scant shade at the base of the pillars. Nung shuffled after him. The ogryn's breathing was loud and ragged.

Abruptly, two figures whirled into view around the side of one of the columns: Lynta and Thonius. Somehow, they had disarmed one another. Their desperate combat was extraordinary, almost too fast for the eye to follow. Kick, jab, kick, evade, duck, slice, jab. Two perfectly trained killers unleashed. Molotch raised his rifle and tried to draw a bead on Thonius, but Nung knocked his aim aside. 'Zygmunt hit her!' he wheezed.

It was true. He might. The combatants were a blur of circling bodies and scything limbs. There was no way to separate them.

Molotch ran past them instead, tracing his way down the sunburnt track towards site C. He quickly left Nung behind.

Molotch paused beside the last of the pillars, panting, and gazed down at the cliff-face and the cleft. There was no sign of life; in fact, there was no sign of anything except the disengaged excavator modules cooking in the sun where the servitors had left them.

He took a step forward. Something hard and hot pressed against his temple.

'Drop the rifle,' said a woman's voice.

Molotch hesitated.

'Drop it, Molotch, or I drop you.'

Molotch tossed the tau weapon into the white dust. 'Is that you, Kara Swole?' he asked.

'You better believe it, you frig-wipe ninker.'

She let him turn slightly, so the barrel of her laspistol was in his face. Of all the bastard's band, she had always been his favourite. A dancer-acrobat, short, well muscled, womanly. Her body was tightly packed into a cream

skinsleeve, and her red hair pressed down under a hood. She wore glare-goggles. Her small, expressive mouth and wide cheekbones were as attractive as he had remembered.

She was not smiling.

‘I always did think you picked the wrong side, Kara,’ he said. She spat, and banged the nose of the pistol into his throbbing, gap-toothed mouth so hard it made him whine.

‘So help me, I’ll kill you for what you did on Majeskus. So help me, I’ll —’

She halted and stiffened, as if hearing some invisible command. ‘All right, all right,’ she protested to someone not there at all. ‘Alive.’

‘He’s with you, isn’t he?’ Molotch said. ‘Tell him... tell him I’ll see him in hell.’

Nung had finally caught up with his master. He slithered down between the last of the pillars, howling Molotch’s name and firing the cannon.

Molotch threw himself down as the fusillade of fat-cal shots went over him. He saw Swole leap the other way, turning an expert but desperate handspring in the dust. She cleared the fire zone as far as one of the excavators, and ducked down as rounds spanged off its bodywork. Then she ran, lithe and fast, into the jungle. Molotch wondered if Nung had hit her. He doubted she would still have been moving if he had.

Molotch snatched up the pulse rifle and fired a few blurts after her, splattering tubers and cups.

‘Nung! Stay guard here!’ he instructed, and ran towards the cleft.

In the crooked, sweltering dark, he met Boros Dias coming the other way.

‘Back!’

‘I heard shooting...’

‘Back, doctor!’

Boros Dias retreated into the excavated chamber. The organic parts of the mangled servitors were already beginning to rot.

‘What’s happening?’ Boros Dias demanded plaintively as Molotch pushed past him. ‘Molotch?’

‘The justice of the Imperium of Man, swaggering with its own self-importance, has come to interfere with us.’

‘The Imperium? You mean the Inquisition?’

Molotch took an expensive larisel-fur brush from Dias’s kit and began to brush dust away from the frieze.

‘You mean the Inquisition?’

‘Shut up, Dias.’

‘Oh great throne of Man...’ Dias whimpered and slid down the wall onto his backside.

‘Shut up, Dias.’

The brush was too fussy, too slow. Molotch upturned the xenoarcheologist’s field kit and began to pick through the items that had spilled out onto the gritty chamber floor. He found the hand-flamer Boros Dias used for frying off lichen and algae.

It ignited with a single pump of the trigger, and Molotch wound the nozzle up to full. The flame was blue-hot. He ran it along the lines of the carving, frying out dust, blasting away loose matrix. The narrow chamber filled with the acrid stink of cooking stone.

‘You’ll damage the relic!’ Boros Dias yelled, seeing what he was doing. ‘It’s priceless!’

‘I know,’ said Molotch, agreeing with both points. He burned away more dust and sand, heedless. ‘How long would it take you to reveal the rest of this frieze, doctor?’

‘A week... maybe two...’

‘We don’t have an hour.’

The flamer was no good against the thicker coverings of ancient rock that caked the base and upper left quadrant of the relief. Molotch snatched up a sample hammer and started chipping the layers of rock away with brutal strokes.

‘Stop it! Molotch, stop it!’ Boros Dias cried, getting to his feet. ‘You’re destroying—’

‘Shut up, Dias,’ Molotch said, cracking away more splinters with fierce, fluid blows.

‘Sir, you pay me to advise you. You pay me well for my expert opinion. We have an understanding, a compact. I only agreed to join you because you said the excavation work would be done with rigorous attention to formal practice.’

‘Shut up, Dias.’

‘Molotch, you are brutalising the treasure of the past! You are vandalising the most important—’

Molotch turned, sweating and short of breath. He lowered the sample hammer. ‘Doctor, you are completely correct. This is sacrilege, and I have contracted you at great expense to oversee this project in all formal particulars.’

‘You have, sir,’ Dias agreed. ‘If we preserve the find, perhaps the Inquisition will take that into account.’

Molotch smiled. ‘You really don’t understand what the Inquisition means, do you, doctor?’

‘I—’ Boros Dias began.

‘Doctor, I think it only fair that we conclude our professional arrangement here and now. Consider yourself freed of the terms of our contract.’

Boros Dias began to smile. Then his face melted, just as it had started to scream. His bared skull cracked like pottery and he fell onto his back.

Molotch dropped the hand-flamer. ‘I never liked you,’ he said to the smouldering corpse. Then he turned back to the relief and resumed his frantic attack. The smell in the chamber was now much, much worse.

He only had time left for another few savage blows. There was so much more hidden. Perhaps if he’d had a power drill...

He tossed away the hammer and located the portable brass picter from amongst the late doctor's overturned kit. Two or three wide angle shots of the whole, then a series of close-ups, one section at a time, with as much overlap as he could manage.

His thigh throbbed like hell.

Molotch tucked the picter into his bodyglove and squirmed his way out of the cleft.

NUNG WAS DEAD. Blood-loss from the ugly gunshot wound had finished him. He lay as he had fallen: propped up over one of the excavators. Nte-flies foamed around his face and the hole between his ribs.

Beyond the massive pillars, wretchedly thick black smoke boiled up from the direction of the camp, staining the bright, empty sky. Molotch could hear the distant chatter of exchanging gunfire.

Running as fast as he could in the heat, he followed the eastern path out of the cut of the cliff, away from the pillars, and into the emerald shade of the adult tubers. These were monsters: their trunks were five metres in diameter, their cups like basins, and their boughs and fleshy leaves arched up twenty metres. Poison-bees hummed around him as he ran. Viscous sap-pools splashed under his feet.

Only his most trusted – Kyband and Lynta – knew about the escape plan. Where they'd first made planetfall, over to the west of the sites they'd hidden a way out. They'd done this even before they'd established the habi-camp.

His heart was racing. He knew it would take months to recover from this ordeal. But he pushed himself on.

At first, he missed the spot. Burned out and panicking, he fell down on his hands and knees and began to cry. Then his Cognitae-schooled intellect took over; the mind that encompassed noetic techniques, polished and refined by the great and abominated academy. He sat up, and breathed deeply to slow his panic. Then he methodically consulted his wrist-mounted locator. Over to the north, a hundred metres.

Molotch got up again and ran in that direction. Sunlight invaded the clearing where the drop flier sat. It was a handsome little thing, a Nymph model recon flier, removed surreptitiously from a Guard munitions depot in the Helican sub. It crouched on six long hydraulic legs, its wings folded back. It looked like a giant metal mosquito.

Molotch had left it under canvas. The camo-tarp was now heaped up on the mucky ground.

He stepped forward. Lynta appeared from behind the tail boom.

‘Throne, you scared me,’ said Molotch.

‘I have that effect on most people,’ she smiled. ‘It’s all gone to hell, hasn’t it, Zygmunt?’

Molotch nodded. ‘It has. But all is not lost. We can escape, you and me. This bird can get us clear. We’ll fire up a beacon. Brice can send a shuttle down to meet us. We’ll be gone before the fighting’s over.’

She shrugged.

He popped the cockpit door and leaned in to fire up the engines. The vector fans began to whine into life.

‘Thonius. Did you kill him?’ he asked.

She replied, but he couldn’t hear her over the mounting fan-chop.

‘Thonius? I said, did you kill the bastard? Last I saw, you were deep in it.’

‘That was all for show,’ she said. She was pointing her snub-las at his face.

‘Lynta?’

‘Game’s over, Molotch.’

‘God-Emperor no!’ he mumbled in dismay. ‘I trusted you... you’ve been with me for nearly a year! Lynta! We even—’

‘Yeah, I know. Makes me sick just to think of it. Drop the pulser.’

‘Tell me this isn’t true, Lynta...’

‘My name isn’t Lynta. It’s not even Patience Kys, but that’s how I’m known these days.’

‘Patience Kys? But she’s one of that bastard’s—’

‘Exactly. Toss the tau gun.’

The murder-hardness had not left her green, green eyes. He threw the long, square-ended xeno-weapon into the mud at his feet.

She gestured with the snub. ‘Now kill the engines.’

With his gaze fixed on her, he reached over into the cockpit, keeping his hands visible, and took hold of the throttle.

And rammed it forward.

The engines screamed into max-thrust. They stripped wet, black flesh off the tubers around the clearing, blew a rippling crater in the ooze beneath the flier and threw Patience Kys onto her back.

The Nymph rose, wings unfolding, and wallowed sideways, crushing into the tuber stands and thrashing them into mush with its veetol jets. Molotch clung on, and scrambled up into the cockpit, screaming out with the terrible effort. Twice, he nearly fell off.

He seized the controls and calmed the yawing flier. Las-shots bounced off the nose. Kys was on her feet below, blasting up at him. Molotch veered away and started to climb hard, leaving the traitorous bitch behind.

He circled over the black jungles and white scarps, getting his bearings. He slammed the canopy shut. The pall of smoke from the camp rose to the east.

‘Brice! Brice! This is Molotch!’ he shouted into his vox-link. ‘I need evac now!’

The signal crackled. ‘Understood. Five-eleven-three nine-six-four rendezvous lock. Make it fast!’

Molotch punched in the coordinates and slammed the flier west over the gloss-black rot-forests. He could do this. He *would* do this...

‘Where you going, Zygmunt?’ a voice suddenly crackled over his link. Molotch knew the voice. It belonged to Harlon Nayl, the most dangerous agent in his bastard-adversary’s private cadre.

‘Does it matter where I’m going, bounty hunter?’ Molotch said, cueing the vox to ‘send’. ‘I don’t see you being able to stop me now.’

‘Oh, you know me, Zygmunt,’ the voxed voice replied. ‘You bring a blade, I bring a cannon... you bring a flier...’

Noiseless, arch-winged, ominous, a Valkyrie assault carrier rose from the forest before him, washing the canopy growth back in a wide, concentric ripple. It was dressed in black camo paint, its Imperial Guard insignia removed. Its chin-turret began to flash.

Molotch’s Nymph lost a wing in a shower of splintering metal. It began to descend hard, auto-rotating. Multi-laser shots burst its belly and exploded its leg assemblies. The ‘crash’ alarm was blaring. Fire swirled up into the cockpit and roasted his legs.

Molotch screamed.

Then the first rocket struck home and blew off the flier’s tail boom. More followed from the Valkyrie’s under-wing pods, snaking out on curling spits of smoke. The Nymph came apart, burning, and dropped like a stone towards the inky forest cover, scattering casing fragments, engine parts and glass specks as it fell.

Zygmunt Molotch, ablaze from head to foot, was still alive when the hull finally met the ground.

A firestorm rushed out from the impact point, sucked back in again with the shockwave overpressure, and left a scorched circle ten hectares across in the undergrowth.



NOW

Local spring time, Petropolis, Eustis Majoris, 401.M41

TIRED, I MAKE myself comfortable. Not in any physical way. The sustain-field of my chair accommodates my rudimentary body-needs. I settle and adjust mentally, according to the psykana rituals.

A soft-edged trance allows me to open up. I can hear hectic noise from the ship around me, but I muffle it out. I am weary from the long voyage.

I concentrate. I resolve. I see nothing. I feel everything. Everything that makes up Eustis Majoris. Bloat-world, obese with cities. Filthy with a crust of dirt I can taste. It is like examining a putrefying corpse.

My fingertips feel contaminated already, though I have no fingers.

Eustis Majoris. It makes me gag. Old world. Rain-eaten world. Sub-sector capital. The smell of tar and slime and ouslite on its consumptive breath. The dry odour of trade, the stale stink of vice.

It is hard for me to bear. My gorge rises, my stomach turns.

I resolve. There is too much data, too many signals from too many lives. I have to focus. They are down there. My people, hard at work. I must not lose them.

Specifics. I look for specifics. I hunt for the glints of the wraithbone markers. I whisper through lives, from one to another, as if walking through the rooms of an endless mansion.

I am a courtesan called Matrie, beautiful but spurned by my lover-protector, dreaming of a rich, new patron. My skirts are heavy with lace.

I am a drunk called Tre Brogger, counting out change on a bar top to see if I can afford one more snifter of amasec.

I am a footpad without a name. I am running, out of breath. My estoc is slippery with blood. I think I belong to a clan, and I think the clan will be pleased with the pocket-chron and credit wafers I have just acquired.

I am a washerwoman, crying over the son I once gave away.

I am a hab super, dry heaving as I force entry to a stack apartment where flies fill the air. Three weeks since the old man was last seen. I will have to call the marshals. I might lose my job for this.

I am a bird. Free.

I am an administry clerk called Olyvier, tapping at the keys of my codifier, the screen reflecting green phantoms at my augmetic eyes. I have awful halitosis because of an abscess in my gum. I cannot afford the medicae fees unless I put in extra shifts all month. I have a scheduled break in one hundred and nineteen minutes.

I am a servitor, stacking boxes in a stock-house. I had a name once, but I have forgotten how to say it. It takes an effort just to remember to stack the boxes the right way up. The boxes have arrows on their sides.

I am a pardoner called Josev Gangs. I am waiting nervously for the court doors to open.

I am a rat, and I am gnawing. I am a rat.

I am a gamper called Benel Manoy, crouching under the shutters of a sink-shop, waiting for the rain to come and bring me business. I am nine. My gamp, furred, is taller than I am. It was my father's, when he carried the service. It needs new skinning, because it is sorely worn. The name on the gamp is still my father's. When I get it reskinned, I will have 'Benel Manoy' writ upon it.

I am a wherryman called Edrick Lutz, pulling on the oars of my skiff as I sing out for business. The water is murky and smells of piss. I was married once. I still miss her. The bitch. Where is all the trade today? The quays are empty.

I am a sheet-press worker called Aesa Hiveson. I am sound asleep in my one-room hab in the stacks of Formal K. The double-shift left me exhausted, so I fell asleep the moment I sat down. The feeble shower I

intended to get under is still running. The water pipes are thumping and banging. They do not wake me. I am dreaming of a fine custard dessert I once tasted at a distant cousin's wedding. He was a wealthy man. I will not taste its like again.

I am a nurse in the Formal G medicae hall. Everything smells of contraseptic. The lights are too bright. I do not like the way the starchy uniform constricts my upper arms. It reminds me that my upper arms are too fat. The name on my badge is Elice Manser, but my real name is Febe Ecks. I have no qualifications. I lied to get this job. One day they will find me out. Until then, I intend to make the most of my unchallenged access to the postpartum hall. The cult pay well, especially for healthy babies.

I...

I am anonymous, gender uncertain, a very long time dead, undiscovered behind a false wall in Formal B. I am two girls in PDF youth uniforms, left in shallow graves in the north end flowerbeds of Stairtown Park, behind a row of acid-browened bushes. I am a man hanging from a rope in room 49/6 of a condemned hab-stack. I am the family of a girl who vanished on her way to lessons. I am a fab-worker who keeps pict-shots of young men in the same bureau drawer as a whetted combat knife. I am a frabricator, felled by a heart attack on my way home on a transit mag-lev. I am a tree that is withering in High Administratum Square.

I AM AN Imperial inquisitor called Gideon Ravenor.

The realisation makes me start. I had almost lost sight of myself in the discordant psyk-noise. Slowly, out of the mass of fidgeting data, I lock down the signals. One at a time, each one is almost drowned out by the polyphony of living minds. It is like trying to single out a lone voice from a choir of ten billion.

Focus, Gideon. Focus...

There! There's Thonius. And Kys the telekine, too. Together, in a bustling commercial street, surface level, two vital life-beats in a mosaic of millions.

And there's Kara. Bright as a pulsar, shining up from deep in the sink levels. I feel her tense. Her heart rate accelerates. I smell the dining house around her. Oh shit, the god-damned ninker is going for it – Lost her!

Too much, *too many*. The acid rain drenching the upper level streets burns my skin, though I have no skin. The sensation is delicious. I wish I could linger on it.

No time for that. I taste Nayl. Pure muscle and testosterone. Hugging the shadows of a deep, sink-stack slum.

And then...

What's this? Who's this? Beloved Emperor, this one hurts to touch. Hurts so very much... From inside his head, I hear his name. Zael...

PART ONE

BURN CITY



ONE

HE USED HIS first flect the summer he turned eleven, but he'd seen them before. Seen the users too. Scrap-heads, burn outs, wasters. Then he found out just how crap life in the sink-stacks could get.

Four months before his eleventh birthday, the Departamento Munitorum shut down two fabricatories in the district. Nineteen thousand indentured workers were, in the Munitorum's words, 'decruted'. No reason was ever offered for the closures. But it was common knowledge that there was a trade slump right across the sub. Stories went round that new, automated plants had been opened in the northern-most zone: plants where a single servitor could perform the work of twenty indents without the need for sleep shifts. Other rumours said the fabs had lost a navy contract to manufactories on Caxton. Whatever, the work was gone. The fabs were shuttered up and boarded. Nineteen thousand able indents were hung out to rot.

Zael's parents had both died in a hivepox outbreak years before. He lived in the stacks with his granna and his sister, Nove. She was eighteen, a flat-frame rigger, and the family's only wage earner. Nove was one of those decruted.

It got hard, fast. Welfare and subsist tokens couldn't feed them. Zael was forced to cut scholam sessions to earn money, by doing errands for local traders. Some of them were less than clean. He never asked what was in the brownply carriers he delivered to scribbled addresses in the stacks. Meanwhile, granna killed her worries with the fumes from spent glue-wands that she gathered from the trash spills behind the hemming fab. And Nove looked for work.

She found none. But somewhere in the looking, she found flects. Zael didn't know how she paid for them. He got used to her glassy look and the vacant smile.

‘Should try one, little,’ she said once. He'd always been ‘little brother’, but now ‘brother’ seemed too much like an effort.

He'd come home after an errand job with a sweaty fold of notes in his pocket. Nove hadn't been expecting him back so soon. She started up from the little dinette table in the hab's tiny kitchen, and pushed something away under a grubby dish towel. Zael stood in the doorway, fascinated by the glint of whatever it was she was trying to hide.

Nove relaxed once she realised it was him. She'd been afraid it was the marshals, or a surprise knock from the ministorum temperance division. They'd been working the stacks in Formal J that week, going from door to door bearing pamphlets and disapproving expressions.

Zael stepped into the kitchen, forked the bills out of his pocket, and dropped them onto the rusty drainer.

‘Good one, little,’ Nove said. ‘Good little little, working hard.’

Zael ignored her and looked for the last of the citrus-flavoured drink he'd hidden in their larder.

Nove had already found it and drank it. He set a pan on the stove to boil water for a dehyd soup mix instead.

His sister slid the dishtowel back to reveal a small chunk of glass, irregular and no longer than a thumb. It lay in a crumpled sheet of pale red tissue paper.

He tried to look busy so she wouldn't notice him sneaking a glance. The water pinged in the pan as it boiled. The kitchen smelled of soured meat stock and granna's glue.

Nove smoothed out the edges of the tissue wrap and stared down into the sliver of dirty glass. She blinked, then shivered. Her lips were trembling. She rocked back against the chair rest, and put her hands flat on the table-top.

That's when she said it. ‘Should try one, little.’

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘Makes everything seem better.’

The soup in the pan boiled over, and drowned the burner’s flame. Zael had to twist the tap quickly to prevent the room from filling with escaped gas.

A WEEK LATER, Nove was dead. The marshals collected up her body, marked the scene, and hosed down the sink-alley. They said she’d fallen from an upper landing while under the influence of a proscribed substance. No one was ever able to explain why she’d landed face up. Backing away from something. People backed away when they were scared.

Eighteen storeys. Only the medicae mortus’s report established which way up she’d been at impact.

YEARS OF WATCHING his granna inhale fumes from discarded wands, years of watching her sneeze up blood-stringed snot and piss herself in her armchair had made Zael damn sure he would never try her particular poison.

But there was something different about fleets. They were just bits of glass. Little, grubby chunks of glass wrapped in pale red tissue. He saw dealers on dark block corners handing them over in exchange for cash. He’d heard of parties where a dozen eager users had shared the same, large pane.

The summer he turned eleven, he’d done a run for a local type called Riscoe. Nove had been dead three weeks. Riscoe, a bloater with his very own atmosphere of stale sweat stink, raffled Zael’s hair with fat salami fingers, and remarked he was clean out of bills. Did Zael want to wait for cash, or would he take a look as payment? Zael took the look. A tiny bundle of pale red tissue was fished out of Riscoe’s coat and passed to him underhand, like a card sleight.

‘Lose yourself,’ Riscoe said. He hadn’t meant ‘go away’. It was just user advice.

Zael kept the flect in his pocket for eight days. Finally, one night, when his granna was unconscious, he went up to the stack-hab's deserted service level, unfolded the tissue, and looked.

And never looked back.

HE WAS TWELVE now. Or fourteen. He couldn't be sure, but he was certain it was an even number. He ran full time, and took his wages in flects – or money that he used for flects. Either way, it worked. The only recent memory that stood out was the removal of his granna's body by the Magistratum.

'How long has she been dead?' the Magistratum medicae asked him, pulling a gauze mask down from his grimacing mouth.

'My granna's dead?'

'Choked on her own vomit...' the medicae faltered. 'She's decomposing. Must have died weeks ago. Didn't you notice?'

Zael shrugged. He'd just scored a flect and wanted to use it. It itched in his pocket. These men and their questions were keeping him from it.

'Everything will be fine,' the man said, standing back as his colleagues wheeled a shapeless bodybag out through the kitchen onto the stack landing. He was trying to sound reassuring.

'I know,' Zael said.

ZAEL WAS LOOKING for a look when he saw the guy.

The guy was trying to blend, but he wasn't making it. Tough-looking knuck-head: tall, wide in the shoulder and heavy in the arms. He could almost have passed for one of the Stack clan's moody hammers – which he was clearly trying to do – except that he was a little too washed and his matt-black bodyglove was too new. Zael had been intending to score a flect from his usual dealer, a flat-brained tube addict called Isky who worked out of a stack hab on the lower northsink. But when he sussed the guy, he made new plans.

The guy followed him, all the way down through the stacks of Formal J to the river bridge. Zael loitered a while on the bridge's wrought iron walkway, gazing down at the polysty garbage bobbing in the murky water. A steam train rattled over the boxgirder elevation above him, strobing carriage lights down at the unlit river. Coal-tar vapour shrouded the walkway for a few seconds, and Zael took his chance to slip.

Two streets later, heading into the hab-stacks of Formal L, he spotted the guy again. No mistake. The matt black bodyglove, the shaved head, the dark goatee that hadn't been sink fashion for several seasons.

At Crossferry, Zael split west, hoping to shake. The guy was good. Really good. A double-back, a jink, and still he was there, hanging back.

Zael started to run. He ran back along Crossferry, through the stalls of the weekly cheap, and along a gloomy underpass below the triangle stacks. He turned to look back over his shoulder, and ran smack into an open hand.

The guy clamped him around the throat and pushed him back against the wall.

'You're a looker,' said the guy, his voice edged with an off-world accent. 'I was trying to make this easy on you, but you needled it. Your dealer. I want your dealer.'

'Screw you,' Zael said, laughing falsely.

The grip tightened, and wasn't even remotely funny any more.

'WHY D'YOU WANT my dealer so bad?' Zael asked when the guy let him go.

'Because.'

As if that explained everything.

'You a marshal?'

The guy shook his head.

'What then?'

'Worst thing you can imagine.'

Zael breathed hard. He was scared now. He got hassled every day in every way, but not like this. This guy wasn't a user looking for a dealer to rip off, and he wasn't a moody hammer out to fix the competition. He was hardcore. Zael wasn't about to lead him to Isky, but he knew he had to give this guy something actual. There were some other dealers he knew of, over in the Formal L stacks. He had no qualms about giving them up. It was his damn neck in the vice.

'You got a name?' Zael asked.

The man paused. 'Yours or mine?' he asked, as if speaking to an invisible person beside him. A pause. The guy nodded.

He turned to Zael.

'Call me Ravenor,' he said.

IT STARTED TO rain. A brisk westerly had thickened the cloud cover over the district, and precipitation alarms fixed to the street posts began to bleat.

Carl Thonius didn't seem to hear them, so she pulled him by the elbow and gestured towards the cover of the tintglas walkway.

'I hate this frigging planet,' he said.

Two dozen centuries of dirty industry had poisoned the atmosphere of Eustis Majoris. Ninety per cent of the time, the immense city-state of Petropolis stewed under a roof of toxic stain cloud, its streets choked with hydrocarbon smog. Every now and then, the clouds burst and drenched the surface quarters with acid rain. The rain ate into everything: stone, tiles, brick, steel, skin. Epidermal cancer, a by-product of exposure to the rain, was the planet's second biggest killer behind pollutant-related emphysemas.

The moment the rain-burn alarms started to sound, gampers flocked out of alleyways and sink shops and began loudly offering their services to passers-by. Each one flamboyantly unfurled the long stemmed, telescoping umbrella he carried over his shoulder like a spear. Some gamps were treated paper, others steel-silk or plastek or cellulose. Almost all had been

hand-painted in eye-catching ways and inscribed with details concerning hourly rates and the gamper's unimpeachable character.

The two off-worlders shooed them away and kept themselves under the walkway. They could hear the corrosive rain pattering on the tintglas, and sizzling on the open flags of the street.

Carl Thonius kept a linen handkerchief clamped coyly over his nose and mouth. He had soaked it in oil of osscil.

There had been a look of fastidious distaste on his face since the moment they had arrived on the surface.

'You look like a complete pussy,' Patience Kys told him, not for the first time.

'I don't know how you can begin to suffer this foul air,' he replied scornfully. 'Every breath brings a lungful of pestilential filth. It is quite the most loathsome frigging arsehole of a planet I have ever known.'

Thonius was a man of unremarkable stature but remarkable poise. He stood or walked or sat just so – always with a perfect mix of elegance and composure. An ankle turned thus, an elbow crooked. He was dressed in a red velvet suit that screamed of good tailoring, with expensive, black buckle-shoes and white lace cuffs, and a mantle-slicker of oxidised grey plastek. He was twenty-nine years old, standard. His heavy blond hair was brushed back off his high forehead and he had dusted his face with white foundation. With the pasty pallor and the kerchief to his nose, he looked like a classical school statue – 'Gentleman about to sneeze'.

'Pussy,' she repeated. 'Reminds me of home.' Patience Kys had been born on Sameter in the Helican sub: another dirty, smoggy, deluged hab-stacked world. The Imperium was full of them.

They made an odd couple. The dandy and the vixen. Taller than him, athletically slender, she walked with an exaggeratedly casual roll that seemed to slide her along the pavement. Her chocolate-brown bodyglove was detailed with scales of silver and left nothing to the imagination except the risks involved. Her black hair was coiled up in a tight chignon

secured by two long silver pins, and her face was pale and angular. Her eyes were green.

‘Lost him,’ she admitted.

Thonius glanced at her and cocked a plucked eyebrow. ‘The blue one,’ he said.

‘And how can you tell?’

The walkway and street before them was a bobbing sea of gamps in the downpour. In the midst of them, a blue one stood out. ‘No markings. No inscriptions or hourly rates. He’s rich. He doesn’t use a public gamper. He has his own man.

‘The stuff you know...’ she mocked. ‘Though you’re still a pussy.’

Thonius snorted, but he didn’t deny it. Anyone shy of an Adeptus Astartes in full Terminator plate was a pussy compared to Patience Kys.

They moved through the midday crowd, following the blue shade. It was morbidly fascinating to see how many pedestrians around them had skin burns. Some old and faded, some raw and new. Some – and Carl Thonius pressed his fragrant kerchief tighter still – no longer burns, but discolouring into lethal melanomas. The received remedy was faith paper. You could buy it from street corner vendors and stalls in the sink-shop arcades. Tissue-thin and gummed, it had been blessed by various ecclesiarchy somebodies and infused with palliative serums like thisde, milkroot and flodroxil. You cut it to shape – usually into little patches – moistened it, and stuck it to your rain-burns. Faith, and the God-Emperor of Mankind, did the rest. The civilians around them were speckled with faith paper patches. One old man had his entire neck and forehead wrapped in it, like papier-mâché.

A whirring sound passed over them through the lethal rainfall. Kys looked up in time to see a flock of birds turn overhead and dart as one up into the high reaches of a city spire, hazed by the drizzle.

‘How do they live?’ she wondered aloud.

‘They don’t,’ said Thonius.

She didn't know what he meant, but she didn't care. It was too miserable for a Carl Thonius lecture.

At the crossroads on Lesper Street, the blue gamp turned left and bobbled away down the wide boulevard of St Germanicus into the ceramicists' quarter. The rain continued to hiss down.

'Where's he going now?' she muttered.

'It's his only vice. He collects klaylware.'

'Not his only vice,' she ventured.

Thonius nodded. 'The only one he admits to.'

Under iron awnings and heavy jalousie blinds, the artisans and dealers of the quarter had set out their wares on wooden stalls. Blue gamp lingered around those that displayed bowls and vases of a fat-lipped, heavy style, with rich earthy colours and gleaming glazes.

'They say he has the finest collection of antique klaylware in Formal B,' Thonius said.

'You say that like it's something to be proud of. Or even something that makes sense,' Kys said. 'I'm getting bored, Carl. Let's slam him.'

'No. We'll never get his guard down if we push him. He's far too clever for that.'

'His orientation is hetero, isn't it?'

Thonius paused and looked at her. 'That's what the briefing notes said. Why?'

She pulled him by the arm and fast-walked him until they were well ahead of the blue gamp. It was hesitating around another pot-monger's storefront. 'Kys? What are—'

'Shut up. He'll be here in a few minutes,' She gestured to the ceramics display of the shop nearby. 'This place any good?'

'I... uh... yes, I think so. Some fine quality pieces from the late third era.'

'Pick me something.'

'What?'

‘You know this stuff. Because you’re a pussy. Now pick me something. The choicest thing they have.’

UMBERTO SONSAL, SECOND director of the Engine Imperial manufactory in Formal B, was an unpleasantly portly man with soft, full lips and lidless eyes. The rain alarms had stopped – the downpour had abated – and as he approached the ceramics shop he adjusted the dial of his signet ring. The anti-acid scales that had loricated his skin retracted into the slit pockets behind his ears and under his eyebrows. His personal gamper furled the wide blue rain-shield.

Sonsal dabbed his forehead with a lace handkerchief and wandered in between the rows of shelves, occasionally pausing to lift and examine a particular piece. His assistant, his shader and his two bodyguards waited in the doorway of the shop.

The dish on the third shelf was particularly exquisite. No more than late third, perfect in all dimensions, and with a sought-after crackling to the glaze. He was about to reach in and lift it up, when a hand came and scooped it away.

‘Oh, so beautiful,’ murmured the girl as she held the piece up to the light.

‘It is,’ he said, his voice a rich whisper.

‘I’m sorry. Were you about to look at it?’ she asked.

She was stunning. Her eyes so green, her slender form so striking, her love of klaylware so evident.

‘Be my guest,’ Sonsal said.

She turned the piece expertly in her hands, noting the maker’s stamp on the base, and the little disc of paste-paper showing the import serial.

‘Late third?’ she mused, casting a glance at him.

‘Indeed.’

‘And the stamp. It looks like Nooks Workshop, but I think in fact it might be Solobess, before Nooks bought him out.’

She held the piece out to him. He patted his fat lips and blinked. ‘I would concur. You know your ware.’

‘Oh no!’ she said hastily, smiling an intoxicatingly fleeting smile. ‘Not really. I just... I just like what I like.’

‘You have extraordinary taste... Miss?’

‘Patience Kys.’

‘My name is Sonsal, but I would be pleased if you called me Umberto. Patience, your eye is excellent. Will you purchase the item? I recommend you do.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t stretch to something like this. Really, Umberto, my dabbling is confined to appreciation for the most part. I have a few pieces, but I seldom have the capital to buy.’

‘I understand. Does anything else take your eye?’

+THONIUS!+

The call-thought hit him between the eyes like a flung brick. He was on the other side of the street, observing from the awning-covered shop front of a faith paper vendor. Fuming water from the seared roofs shuddered down the old, iron gutter pipes nearby. Thonius cranked up the magnification of his pocket scope.

+Quickly now. Something good!+

‘Are you seeing this?’ Thonius asked. He received an assurance, far softer and quieter than Kys’s crude mind-jab.

‘Suggestions?’ Thonius said.

He listened to the reply and then said, ‘Just to your left, the wide-mouthed urn. No, Kys, your other left. There. The brown one. It’s early fourth, but the maker’s a good one. Marladeki. It’s favourable because the proportions are especially good, and Marladeki died young, so his output wasn’t huge.’

+How young?+

‘I’ll ask. How young? Uh huh. Patience... he died at twenty-nine. Made mainly bowls. An urn is rare.’

+The stuff you know. Okay.+

‘THIS IS NICE,’ Kys said, stroking her hand around the rim of a tall wine flask that had been finished with an almost treacle-black glaze. ‘But this...’

She feigned a sigh as she picked up the wide-mouthed urn ever so gently. ‘Glory, this is a fine piece. Early fourth, I’d say... but what do I know?’

Sonsal took it from her, his eyes as much on her as the urn. ‘You know plenty, my dear. Early fourth. Who is the maker now? I can’t quite make out the stamp...’

Sonsal fixed a delicate jeweller’s lens to his right eye and examined the urn’s base.

Kys shrugged. ‘It couldn’t possibly be Marladeki, could it? I mean... he made so few objects that weren’t bowls.’

Sonsal put his eyepiece away and turned the urn over in his hands.

‘It is,’ he said, softly.

‘No!’

‘By the God-Emperor, Patience, I’ve been looking for a piece like this for years! I’d have passed it over as a fake but for you.’

‘Oh, come now,’ she said with a diffident shrug. The man was loathsome. It was damn hard to remain civil, let alone play the part.

‘I must have it,’ Sonsal said, then glanced at her. ‘Unless you...?’

‘Far and away out of my price range, Umberto,’ she demurred.

Sonsal held the piece up and the storekeeper hurried forward to take it, wrap it and write out the bill of sale.

‘I am indebted to you, Patience,’ Sonsal said.

‘Don’t be silly, Umberto.’

‘Would you... would you do me the pleasure of being my guest for dinner this evening?’

‘I couldn’t possibly—’

‘I insist. To celebrate this acquisition. Really, Patience, it’s the least I could do to acknowledge its finder... and how could you be so cruel as to deprive me of a supper with a woman of such extraordinary good taste?’

‘Umberto, you really are too sweet.’

‘BY THE THRONE, he’s disgusting,’ Thonius muttered. ‘Great golden throne, you’re such a whore, Kys.’

+Shut up, pussy.+

‘Just be careful, Patience. Just be careful.’

THE RAIN-BURN ALARMS had begun to sing again. As Sonsal’s party moved away up the street, his gamper opened the blue umbrella and Sonsal and Patience sheltered beneath it together.

‘Yes, I’m watching them,’ Thonius said tartly, in response to the nudge in his head. He was tailing the blue gamp. ‘I’ll stay with her, don’t worry. If Kara or Nayl are free maybe—’

Nudge.

‘Oh, both of them busy? Very well. I can handle this. Yes, I can handle this. I said so, didn’t I?’

Nudge.

‘Good. Relax, Ravenor. I am ever your servant.’

GOD DAMNED NINKER was going for it.

The reach into the jacket. Always a giveaway. What had he got? A snub? A slide-away? A frigging bolter?

Kara Swole didn’t wait around to find out. She turned a back flip and let a hand-spring carry her over the brushed-steel service counter.

Shots slammed into the heated racks above her, throwing trays of braised meat and steamed veg-mash into the air. Wax jars of preserved fish and pickled cabbage burst and sprayed their noxious contents down the rear of the counter. Someone was screaming. Probably the waitress with the stupendous rack, Kara decided. Let her scream. She had the lungs for it, evidently.

Kara ran along on all fours, quick as a felid, and popped the top three buttons of her waistcoat, allowing access to the shoulder rig she was

wearing. The flatnose Tronsvasse compact virtually fell out into her waiting hand. At the end of the service counter, she sat down on her bottom, her back to the warm steel, and racked the gun's slide.

The shooting had ceased for a second. All she could hear were the yells and howls of the patrons flooding for the exits.

‘Where is he?’ she whispered, testily.

+Five metres to your left, coming forward. A sense of high anxiety about him.+

‘No crap. He’s just drawn down on me. High anxiety doesn’t even begin to cover it.’

+Please be careful. It would be expensive to replace you.+

‘You’re all heart.’

+I was about to add... we don’t want the trouble. Not here. Too many complications. Can you defuse?+

‘Defuse?’

+Yes.+

‘A maniac with a gun?’

+Yes.+

‘Let’s see...’

She raised her head slightly. Two more shots nearly scalped her as they came whining over the counter top.

‘That’s a no.’

+Um.+

‘Look, I can try. Let me see, would you?’

+Close your eyes.+

Kara Swole shut her eyes. After a moment, a clear, slightly fish-eyed vision appeared to her. The service parlour of a dingy public dining house, as seen from somewhere up near the ceiling vents. Every few seconds the view blinked and jumped momentarily, like a badly formatted pict-track. She saw the tables and chairs lying where they had been overturned in the stampede, the litter of broken crockery and food bowls. There was the

counter, its greasy surface gleaming under the hood-lamps. Behind it, in cover, a short, heavily muscled girl in soft gymnast slippers, gorgeous japanagar silk harem pants and a sleeveless leather waistcoat. She was holding a compact auto tight to her splendid cleavage. Under the fringe of her short bleached hair, her pretty eyes were closed tight.

Never liked the bleached look. Must go back to my natural red.

+Concentrate. That's not helping.+

'Sorry.'

And there was the ninker. Other side of the counter, edging round towards the far end. The extended magazine projecting down from the pistol grip of his auto was so long, it looked like he was holding a T-square by the top of the rale.

+Apart from anxiety, I can't assess anything. He's smoked obscura some time in the last thirty-five minutes. It's blocking everything.+

'So he's not likely to fold if I get a good drop on him?'

+Unlikely, I'd say.+

Kara took a deep, pulse-calming breath, her nose filling with the pungent aromas of spilled food and stewed caffeine. Then she snapped upright, aiming the Tronsvasse compact at the ninker.

Who was no longer there.

'Where the frig-?'

+He has, I believe, fled. Rabbited, to use your term.+

A sprang service door behind the counter was gently flapping to and fro. Kara ran to it, keeping the auto at full extension in front of her – the trademark 'ready' position of armed marshals. Kara Swole had never been in the Departamento Magistratum, but a hardnut chastener, name of Fischig, had taught her the skills some years back.

She eased open the swing door. Beyond it was a gloomy little walkway with a sloped, worn lino floor. Crates of freeze-dried noodle bricks and tubs of mechanically recovered cooking fat were stacked along both walls. A hot, bilious stench drifted up from the kitchens below.

The establishment was called Lepton's, one of a chain of family-run public dining houses in the Formal D district of Petropolis. Like all the independent bars and eateries, it was in the sinks. Eighty levels of habs and manufactories weighed down upon it and neither the wan sunlight nor the burn-rain ever penetrated this deep. Only the grim, Munitorum-subsidised canteens could afford higher-level positions on or near the surface street-ways. All of the public places were open round the clock, and catered for the constant shift-work. People came to eat breakfast at tables beside other workers chowing supper and getting addled on cheap grain liq at the end of a hard shift. Down here it was a dark world of artificial lighting, metal decks, flakboard walls and an indelible layer of grease that coated everything.

Kara ran down into the kitchen. Heedless servitors laboured at bulk skillets or broiling vats, and there was a constant clatter of utensil limbs. The air was thick with steam and food smoke, trapped and stirred by vent extractors that had ceased to function properly generations before. The handful of actual humans working the food line were just emerging up from hiding places behind coolers and workstations. They all jumped back into hiding in terror at the sight of another armed body passing through their infernal realm.

'Where did he go?' she demanded of a terrified undercook who was trying to hide himself behind the frying pan he was clutching. He mumbled something unintelligible.

'Where?' she snarled again, and put a round through a nearby fryer for emphasis. Scalding fat began to leak and spurt out of the puncture hole.

'The loading ramp!' the undercook meeped.

She left the kitchen area and hurried into a broad corridor where the mesh decking was mounted with a trackway for narrow gauge carts. On either side were walk-in larders, bottle stores, hanging pantries and – distressingly – an overflowing employees-only latrine that proved to be the real source of the kitchen's underlying smell.

The hatch at the end was open. Cool air gusted up at her. She slid flat to the wall for the last few metres.

The loading ramp was a battered metal platform jutting out from the hatch over a dank, rockcrete chamber. Access tunnels, large enough to take carts and freight vehicles, ran off to left and right, lit by pulsing amber lumo-panels. Overhead, dirty air, dripping acid-water and the faintest daylight filtered down through a vent shaft that went right up to the surface levels. Huge, corroded airmills grated around in the shaft.

Kara went to the platform rail and leaned over in time to see her quarry disappearing up the left hand tunnel. She leapt down and ran after him.

By the time they came out into an alleyway, fumed by the yellow light of sodium lamps and crowded with trash-crates, she had closed the distance between them. He looked back, saw her coming, thought about trying to fire in her direction, but ran again.

‘Halt!’ she yelled.

He didn’t.

Kara dropped down on one knee, aimed, and fired the auto from a braced double-handed grip. The single shot punched through the back of his left thigh and he fell sideways, awkwardly. He hit the face of a trash-crate so hard that he dented the scruffy sheet metal.

He was sobbing as she dragged him upright and threw him against the crate again.

‘That was downright rude. I wanted to have a little talk with you,’ she said. ‘Let’s start again.’

He moaned something about his leg.

‘I’ll try not to make that worse. I want to talk to you about Lumble.’

‘I don’t know any Lumble.’

She kicked him in the thigh-muscle above the bullet hole and made him squeal.

‘Yeah, you do. You were happy to talk about Lumble and his business to those pals of yours in the public.’

‘You must have misheard.’

‘I didn’t hear at all, chump. I read your mind. Lumble. He’s the man. You want it, he can get it. Good price too. Grinweed. Yellodes. Baby blues. Looks. He can sort the lot.’

‘I don’t know! I don’t know!’

‘You don’t know what?’

‘I don’t know what you want!’

+Kara.+

‘Not now. Chump, you so know what I want.’

‘I don’t!’

+Kara.+

‘Not now. Listen, you little ninker, I want an intro. I want an intro to Lumble. I want a serious in with the man.’

‘That could be arranged,’ said a voice from behind her.

Kara let the wretch go and he slid down the crate side, weeping. There were six big triggers in the alley behind her, all leather smocks and studded jackets and vat-grown muscle enhancements. The leader had acid-burns across his face, tracing out deliberate designs in scar tissue. Clansters. Moody hammers. Stack muscle.

‘You might have warned me...’

+I tried.+

‘Help you, gentlemembers?’ she asked, flashing a grin.

They all smiled back. Their teeth were filthy reefs of steel dental implants and craggy amalgam. Several had lip piercings or secondary teeth woven into their tongue tips.

‘Well, aren’t I just the frigged one here?’ she said. She did a rapid risk-assess. Two had slingblades, two had long-handled industrial mallets and one, the leader, had a chain-fist. It buzzed menacingly as the oiled blade-tracks idled.

She had her auto and her wits. It was even odds in her book.

+It is not even odds, Kara. Do not try it. We will devise another way out of this.+

‘Yeah? Like what?’ she snapped sarcastically.

‘Who you talking to, knuck-bitch?’ the leader asked.

‘The voices in my head,’ she replied, hoping that at least might give them pause. Even in a town as grievously messed-up as Petropolis, folks didn’t like to tangle with the psyk-touched or the demented.

She head-caked that her best starting gambit was to sort the leader with her auto. That would open an account and remove the chain-fist from the equation. From there, it would be a matter of improvisation.

It would have worked too. But as she brought the auto up, the frig-damned ninker on the ground behind her kicked her hard with his good leg and she fumbled forward. One of the work-mallets came down nasty-fast and smashed her gun away into the gutter.

+Kara!+

Somehow she dodged the chain-fist. It scythed a hole through the trashcrate behind her. She jab-punched at the leader’s ribs and felt something give as she dived through, but a slingblade ripped a long cut in the baggy flare of her favourite harem pants. Then a mallet caught her a glancing blow across the left shoulder and she stumbled over onto the gritty rockcrete.

‘Shit! Shit! You gotta ware me! You gotta ware me right now!’

+The distance is too—+

‘Screw the distance! I’m dead meat unless you ware me!’

He obliged. She knew he hated it. She knew she hated it. But there were times when only it would do. The little wraithbone pendant around her neck crackled, and lit up with psyk-light. She convulsed as he took hold and everything that made up Kara Swole – her mind, her personality, her memories, her hopes and desires – folded up and went away into a little dark box made of solid oblivion.

Kara Swole’s body, blank-eyed, leapt up from prone by arching its back. It deflected a mallet-swing with an under-turned hand, and then side-

kicked one of the slingbladers in the chest so hard his sternum snapped like a dry branch.

The sling-blade flew up out of his limp hand, spinning in the air. Kara Swole's left palm lunged out to connect with it – not to catch it but to slap it away, altering its trajectory and greatly increasing its momentum. A clanster dropped his mallet with a thump, and groped up to feel the brand new piercing in his forehead. Then he fell over onto his back.

Straight-legged, bottom out, Kara Swole's body bowed low to avoid a swing from the other mallet, and then it leapt up, spinning horizontally in the air, and delivered a kick with both feet to the face of the mallet wielder.

She landed on her feet, grabbed the other slingblader by the lower jaw, her fingers gripping inside his mouth, and threw him right over onto his back. A back-stamp with her left heel crushed his windpipe. The leader came in, chain-fist shrilling. One of the abandoned mallets was now turning in her hands. She swung it out so the head of it met the punching glove-weapon coming the other way. The mallet-head was completely abraded away in seconds, but it was a duracite tip, and eating it up burned out the drivers of the chain-fist's mechanism. Smoke gusted out of the seized device. Kara Swole's body jammed the splintered end of the mallet-haft into the leader's chest with both hands.

Surrounded by the bodies of the dead and crippled, Kara's own form began to shudder and shake. It dropped down onto its knees, gasping.

Fierce spotlight beams framed it abruptly. Her eyes didn't react to the light.

'Magistratum! Magistratum! Don't make another move or we shoot!'

Pinned in the spotlights, Kara's hands slowly rose in a gesture of surrender.

Armoured and ominous, belligerent figures swept into the light around her, handguns aimed, power-mauls raised.

'On your face! Down! On your face!'

‘I have authority,’ Kara Swole’s voice said, though it wasn’t her own voice at all.

‘You do, huh?’ crackled one of the Magistratum troopers through his visor-mic. ‘What kind of frigging authority explains this?’

Her face, blank-eyed and expressionless, turned up towards him. ‘The authority of the Ordo Xenos, officer. This is an officially sanctioned operation and I am Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor. Please think very carefully about what you do next.’



TWO

ACCORDING TO ZAEL, there was a good place down at the south end of Formal L, on the overflow. Genevieve X ran all the serious business on the overflow, mostly from semi-legit fronts, but there was a place you could go if you wanted to see her yourself.

Zael had never been there in person. He'd never met Genny X nor, as far as he knew, done business with her clan, but it sounded like the sort of big deal the guy was looking for. At first, Zael had thought of taking the guy to one of the smaller dealers in L, but he didn't see that ending happily for him or the dealers. That's when he'd got 'The Plan'.

He was witchy for a look now, shaking a lot, and that made his brain rat-sharp and nasty. The plan was a nice one. No one, not even a big knuck-head like this guy, came down Genny X's place looking for mood. Zael would lead him down there and let the X's hammers do the rest. According to the Plan, Zael would slip away during the mayhem or – and this was where the Plan got clever – he'd make such an impression with Genny X for selling out the guy to her, she'd be grateful and generous. Maybe give him a freebie look, maybe even offer him a job. Shit, wouldn't that be a step up? Even if Genny X wanted him to be her new gamper, that was prestige. Hanging with the X. That put him stacks away from running for the likes of Riscoe and flat-brain Isky. Zael was so bloody pleased with the Plan, he had to remember to keep a smile off his face.

YOU COULD SMELL the overflow long before you reached it. Waste outfalls, garbage slicks, estuary mud, all burned by the rain. It was always low tide under the overflow.

Sometime way back in the whenever – history was not Zael's thing – Petropolis had outgrown the patch of land it had originally sat down on. It

had spread, like a fat arse on a bar stool. Up in the north, in Stairtown, it had invaded the hills. In the south, it had bulged out over the river bay. Originally, stone piers had been built out into the estuarine flats and over the water, their wide bases sunk deep into the ooze by the guild masonae. Then, as demand grew for cheap habs, elevated prefab sections had been constructed between the radiating piers, creating a whole city slum-quarter, forty storeys deep, suspended twenty metres above the silt and water.

It was always sick-damp in the overfloat. Moss grew rampant on every surface, and you were never far from the sound of gurgling bilges. Deep below, railed hatchways led down through the sink-bottom decks into the gloom of the water level, where you could hire cab-boats and wherries to get you from point to point under the slum.

The rain alarms were ringing by the time they got down to the rotting boardwalks of the overfloat, but that didn't matter much because most of the surface streets there were covered over with pitched storm-roofs. In winter season, the overfloat got the worst of the ocean gales.

'Lovely part of town,' the guy said, in a funny, mannered way. Zael decided the guy was being sarky and meant 'this town is so knuck-nasty it hasn't even got a lovely part, but even by its own low standards this is bad.' Typical snooty off-worlder. By then, that's what Zael had decided the guy definitely was. An off-worlder. The name was a dead-give away. 'Ravenor'. Shit! Why not just call yourself 'Imperial aristo from a much richer planet than this' and have done with it?

They wandered down the upmost deck of the Nace Street sink, past the stalls of the jettison-sellers and the drift merchants. Tide-treasure was on offer all around, most of it stinking and caked with black ooze. You could choose yourself a bargain, or – for a few coins extra – get the vendor to hose the thing off with his spigot for a better look. They passed a couple of mech-riggers examining a cylinder block as the vendor's hose splattered the mud away onto the deck. Another merchant was offering IDs, pocket-

watches, dentures, tie-pins and buckles, all of them cleaned up and laid out on a box cart. Quality merchandise that, dredged up from the down-below.

‘People throw the strangest stuff away,’ Zael commented, with a nod to the cart.

The guy said nothing. Just a shrug. Zael knew the guy was down enough to recognise that IDs and dental plates didn’t end up in the silt under the overflow by accident. The thick mudwater down there in the dark was a useful disposal facility for clansters and footpads.

An ecclesiarchy preacher was haranguing the world from a push-pulpit on a street-corner, informing the passing crowds that their souls would corrupt and die unless they mended their ways and followed the light of the God-Emperor. No one was paying him much notice. Maybe it was his metaphor that was at fault. On Eustis Majoris, exposure to the sky did not equal redemption. It equalled faith paper, weeping sores and premature mortality.

On the next street, between the stalls of two more flotsam-sellers, an old woman was tending wooden cages. The sign above her stall asked for charitable donations towards the upkeep and preservation of sheen birds. The things in the cages ranged from the size of a crow to the size of a piphatch, and all of them looked weak and sickly, if not dead. Plumage had been torn or broken off, or eaten away, and eyes and limbs lost. Metal was exposed in many places, delicate wired mechanisms succumbing to rust and acid-gnaw.

‘A coin for the poor birds, sir?’ she called out to the guy as they went past. ‘Just a coin for the poor birds is all I ask.’ She wore a plastek smock and had a mag-lens taped over one eye. On the bench in front of her, a sheen bird was stretched out and pinned down for cleaning in the manner of an anatomical study. Its neck filaments buzzed as its head jerked around, and it piped piteously out of its tiny metal beak. Another bird, much larger and totally devoid of implanted feathers, perched on her shoulder. It was quite a splendid thing, its wing blades and chassis polished chrome.

The guy ignored her and shoved Zael onwards.

THEY WALKED DOWN the stairs to the sink-base crossroads at Wherry Dock. Thirty-six levels of stack towered above them.

‘Where now?’

Zael gestured.

‘You sure? I’m having trouble believing anyone of clout could be found in this part of town. This better not be your idea of a trap.’

Zael flinched. Was the guy on to him? Had he cottoned on to the Plan?

‘Honestly,’ Zael said, trying to sound credible. ‘There are some class places. Genevieve X’s place is in one of the piers. Old money. Trust me.’

‘Trust you?’ The guy laughed. A nasty, grown-up laugh. ‘How old are you?’

‘Eighteen standard,’ Zael said.

‘Try again,’ the guy snorted.

Zael didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to admit that, at some point since his eleventh birthday, he’d forgotten how old he really was.

GENNY’S PLACE WAS a six-storey mansion rising from the centre span of one of the old pier vaults, deep in the under-sink darkness. Even though the walls were dank and mossy, by the light of the deck lamps it looked impressive, and this seemed to silence the guy’s doubts. If there was any class at all on the lower overfloat, it would be here.

‘She’s the deal-engine this side of town,’ Zael said confidently. ‘They say she has links high up in the Munitorum.’

‘That so?’

‘Uh huh. A little backhand lolly every month and she can fix any colour of favour you want. Ident wipes, fake papers, travel permits.’

‘I’m surprised the entire population hasn’t come to her then,’ said the guy, doing his insufferable sarky thing again.

‘She...’ Zael began, and then checked himself. His enthusiasm to whet the guy’s appetite had almost made him say the first thing everybody said

about Genny X. That she had so much moody hammer weight watching her action she was best avoided. Now, saying that would ruin the Plan.

‘She what?’

‘She deals,’ Zael improvised. ‘Looks especially. That’s what you want, isn’t it? Looks?’

‘That’s the idea.’

‘Okay, then. We go round to the side door, and I’ll make an introduction. Then we—’

‘Exactly how stupid do you think I am?’

‘What?’

‘I’m not going to walk in through the front door – or the side door – and let you do the talking, just like that. You think I got this old not knowing how to stay alive?’

‘Then what?’ asked Zael, feeling the Plan slipping away out of his fingers.

‘I have a plan,’ the guy said, which was exactly what Zael had been afraid of.

ON THE SECOND hard knock, the door opened. It was a simple but hefty wooden door, and it swung in on a mechanical bracket. The real door was the shimmering void-field behind it. Through the glitter of the energy screen, Zael could see a moody hammer glaring out at them. The man was big, his face-flesh decorated with acid-burned motifs and metal studs. South Overfloat Shades, by the concentric pattern.

‘What?’ the hammer asked.

‘Got a bit of business,’ said the guy.

‘With who?’

‘With the X.’

‘Concerning?’

The guy nodded down at Zael. He had Zael locked in a double arm-clamp. Zael’s eyes must have looked terrified enough as it was, but the guy gave

his locked arms a painful little wrench and he squeaked for good measure.

‘This piece of knuck,’ the guy said.

Frig-damn me, Emperor, this was so not the Plan.

‘Not interested,’ the hammer said, and started to wind the mechanism that closed the outer door.

‘Okay. I’ll just let him get on with what he was doing. Hell, I’ll even show him to the Officio Inquisitorus myself. That’s in Formal A, isn’t it?’

The hammer stopped. ‘What’s the frigging Inquisition got to do with anything?’

‘That’s something I’ll discuss with the X and not her porter.’

The hammer drew a grease-black pivot-gun from his belt and then turned his head and shouted something away into the darkness behind him.

The void-field crackled and died. The hammer waved them in with the snout of his pivot-gun.

Just before they stepped into the dark hall, Zael heard something. Three words.

+Be careful, Nayl.+

‘What?’ Zael asked the guy

‘I didn’t say anything.’

THE ENTRY WALK into the pier tower was long and dark. The air was humid. Stinking like cattle, eight massive moody hammers – three South Overfloat Shades and five East K stackers – moved in around them as escort. They didn’t bother to frisk the guy. After all, what was he going to do? A hatchway ahead, beyond it a translucent pool of green light. The hammers led them into an anteroom and vanished. It was super-cool in there. Huge chrome vents crafted into the wall decoration pumped clean air in and stale air out. The floor was polished jet, inlaid with repeat fish patterns, and the high arched roof was lit by electro-lamps with turquoise shades. This was serious good living, the first Zael had ever tasted. It seemed a shame he was getting this first good taste at the same time as a shoulder-crunching, elbow-breaking arm-clamp.

‘Could you let me go now?’ he asked.

‘No.’

The guy looked around. Three tall, arched doors, all closed, led off the anteroom, besides the hatch behind them that had let them in.

+Three heartbeats, closing from the left.+

‘What?’ Zael asked.

‘What what?’

‘You said something about heartbeats—’

‘I didn’t. Shut up.’

The left hand door opened. A man wandered in, flanked by two more bulky hammers who took up sentry positions either side of the doorway. They were both Shades – senior members, by the pattern of their ritual-inflicted acid tattoos – and both held wire-stocked lasrifles.

Zael had never seen a lasrifle before. He blinked his fear away. The man was far more terrifying.

He was over two and a half metres tall and extremely thin. Not even stick-thin like Jibby Narrows, who everyone said could get good money working part time as a noodle. This freak was emaciated-thin. He wore a beautiful housecoat of vitrian glass, floor-length, and his arms hung from the sleeves like twigs. Twigs coated in gold foil, that was. His head was a skull with the merest hint of skin. His eyes were augmetic plugs; sutured in, multi-facet insect jobs. He smelled really good – a classy cologne or maybe even a flesh-wired pheromone aura. He didn’t walk. He hovered.

Pausing under the green lamps, he turned his reed-thin neck and regarded Zael and the guy.

‘What is the nature of your business?’ he asked. His words had sound and meaning, but absolutely no flavour to them. ‘Who’s asking?’ said the guy.

‘I am Taper. I am the Mamsel Genevieve’s seneschal.’

The guy hunched his shoulders, diffidently. ‘What we have here is an organ grinder/primate situation. Go fetch the X.’

‘I think not. You are very good at this whole, rugged machismo thing, but you really don’t understand the layers of protocol. The X doesn’t want to have to talk to you. The X doesn’t even want to have to deal with you. Mamsel pays me a great deal of money to process matters for her. I am her eyes and ears. I decide what she will or won’t review. Do you understand?’

‘Maybe,’ said the guy. ‘What if I act up and start throwing my weight around?’

Taper smiled. He hovered over to his waiting hammers, and held out a bony hand. One of them obediently drew a gang knife and put it into Taper’s palm.

Taper turned and snapped the blade. He didn’t even use both frigging hands. He simply snapped the twenty-centimetre steel with a flick of his twig fingers.

‘I am significantly augmented, my friend. I chose to be elegant and slender because I despise obvious physical threat-postures. A massive torso, thick arms, a shaven head... such as yours, for instance. But I did not stint on strength. I could poke your bastard heart out with my tongue.’

‘I see,’ said the guy.

‘I think you do. Now. Explain the nature of your business. To me.’

The guy relaxed his grip on Zael and stepped forward, suddenly modest and unassuming. ‘Look, Sire Taper, sir,’ he said. ‘I’m a newbie to this world. Just got in a few days back, pulled the long haul from Caxton.’

‘And I should care why?’

‘I’ve got the slam in me. I can work and make action. I’m looking to get employment, but this frigging city is all sewn up by the clans.’

‘It is. So go elsewhere.’

‘Easy said. I can’t afford another out-ticket, not even a *freezer* bin. So I decided I needed to prove to the great and good here that I was worth having around. Worth having on the payroll.’

Taper slowly tilted his head and stared at Zael. ‘And you thought this would somehow impress us?’

The guy looked round at Zael too. 'Well, not to look at, I grant you. But I got wind of what this little knuck-head was up to.'

'And what was that exactly?'

'I wasn't doing nothing!' Zael exclaimed.

'Shut it,' the guy told him. 'This little knuck was out to make his mark. He was out to make his big splash. One way or another he knew about Genny X, and he had decided the Inquisition might pay well for the inside track.'

'I frigging didn't!' Zael yelled. 'For knuck's sake, he's making this up!'

'He would say that,' said the guy, grinning in a mean way.

'I suppose he would,' agreed Taper.

Knuck's sake, they were all pals together now.

Taper looked at the guy. 'So what did you have in mind?'

The guy shrugged. 'I brought him to you. I made it easy for you, before the Inquisition got a sniff. I covered your arses. I thought you might look on that kindly and give me a job.'

'What kind of job?' Taper inquired.

'A hammer action. A body job. I can do plenty.'

Taper looked the guy up and down. 'I see. How very enterprising of you.'

'So? You'll give me a place? Put a word in with the X?'

Taper shrugged. 'Let me get this straight. You've brought a fink to me in the hope that in return I might reward you with a job. I could just waste the fink here and give you that job. Or I could waste both of you and spare myself the effort.'

'I guess...'

'I like economy of effort. I favour the latter.'

Taper looked round and nodded to his hammers.

The guy just smiled. 'Oh well, it was worth a try.'

The hammers by the door brought their lasrifles up, slicking off the safeties and making the cells hum. Zael saw his brief, stack-waste life flash before him and wondered vaguely if he had time to run for the door.

He heard two hard, dry bangs. The hammers slammed back against the doorposts, their rifles tumbling from their hands. Both had blackened, bloody holes in the centres of their foreheads and no backs to their skulls any more.

The guy suddenly had a gun in his fist. A great big Navy model Hecuter 10, the muzzle smoking. Taper was gaping at him, absolutely stunned by the speed of what had just happened.

The guy was still smiling.

He put two more rounds into Taper's chest, point blank.

Oblivious, Taper flew at him, twig arms outstretched.

'You really don't understand who you're dealing with!' Taper wailed, his bony fingers closing in a vice.

But the guy had somehow sidestepped him. Despite his bulk and size, the guy moved like lightning. He came up around Taper's lunge and kicked him in the back, sending him sprawling into the corner of the room.

The guy threw something small and black at Taper. 'Sire Taper, it's the other way around. *You* don't understand who *you're* dealing with.'

Instinctively, Taper caught the small black thing. He looked at it for a split second. A split second was all he had.

The grenade's blast vaporised him and brought down the wall behind him.

Before the dust had settled, the guy was up and running.

+Three heartbeats in the hallway outside!+

'Three heartbeats in the hallway!' Zael screamed out.

The guy was already firing through the doorway.

'How did you know that?' he yelled.

'I heard it...' Zael said.

'How did he hear it?' the guy asked no one at all.

'Don't leave me here!' Zael cried.

+Don't leave him.+

'You're kidding me!' the guy snorted to the invisible voice.

+I never kid. You know that. Don't leave him. I want to know how he's picking me up.+

The guy glanced round at Zael.

'Come on,' he said. He wasn't happy about it. Not at all.

HIS PISTOL HANGING in his hand in an alarmingly casual way, the guy went out into the hallway with Zael behind him. The guy's shots had made a mess of two more hammers who were sprawled on the tiled floor. One was still twitching. Just death-spasms. The last jerks of a ruined body.

A few metres on, at the end of a smeared trail of blood, the third hammer was trying to crawl to safety. The guy casually shot him once in the back of the head.

Zael swayed and turned to face the wall. His mind was a mess. The guy probably thought he was queasy because of the killing, but Zael had seen plenty. This was withdrawal. A look was long overdue. Throne, how he needed one! Just a little cheapo splinter even, to calm his nerves.

'What are you doing?' the guy snapped.

Zael had been stroking the cool wall with his palms and resting his sweaty forehead against it. He glanced round, aware that the muscles in his face were beginning to tick.

'God-Emperor, look at you. Don't skid out on me now, or I will leave you.'

Zael flinched, hoping to hear the invisible voice again, sticking up for him. But there was nothing now. The guy seemed to notice it too.

'Ravenor?' he asked. 'Ravenor? You with me still?'

Zilch. 'Ravenor?'

'I thought *you* were Ravenor,' Zael said. The guy sneered at him. He was about to say something, probably something impolite, when the invisible voice came through again. Just a hiss. Just a whisper, as if it was under great strain.

+Kara.+

'Kara? What about her? Ravenor?'

+In trouble.+

‘What sort of trouble? Are you waring her?’

Nothing. The voice had gone away again.

‘Shit,’ breathed the guy. ‘I should get out of here. They might need me.’

‘Getting out of here,’ Zael shrugged. ‘Now that’s a good idea. I remember where the door is.’

‘No,’ said the guy. We’re too committed. We stick to this.’

None of which was what Zael wanted to hear.

THE HALLWAY TURNED into a lounge area with big, red satin sofas and three fabulous hardlight sculptures. The blinking, neon-bright structures of the art utterly captured Zael’s attention so the guy had to drag him on by the hand. Ahead they could see yellow-robed household staff fleeing before them.

A moody hammer came running towards them down a corridor to their right. He was hugging a sack to his chest, and skidded up hard as he saw them. His eyes grew.

He dropped the sack and started to run off the way he’d come. The guy aimed his pistol at him, but thought better of it. Instead, he went over to the sack and emptied it onto the floor. Dozens of little parcels fell out, each wrapped in red tissue paper.

Flects.

‘Throne, let me have one! Let me have one, please!’ Zael blurted out, realising at once how frigging pathetic he sounded.

Kneeling, the guy sneered at him, and tossed a single parcel towards his hands. Zael almost dropped it.

‘This stuff is filth. Filth you can’t imagine. You know about the Ruinous Powers?’

Zael shook his head.

The guy sighed. ‘Just use it. If you’re coming with me, I’d rather have you sussed and sorted than witchy-edged.’

‘I’ll be fine. Fine. Really. Fine,’ Zael replied. He wanted to prove to this guy that he wasn’t just some scrap-head, some burn-out, some waster. But he put the flect in his pocket all the same.

THEN IT GOT really nasty. It went down so fast, Zael wished he’d taken the look while he’d had the chance. Genny X’s hammers – those that hadn’t run – put up a last effort to defend their boss. They were all East K stackers, a clan notorious for not knowing when to quit. Shades and Jack-Ls had a rep for being meaner, but the stackers were famously brute-stupid and stubborn.

Zael and the guy came up some stairs into another room: a gloomy gallery with paintings and hololiths on the walls. It seemed empty, but the hammers were hiding behind furniture and wall panels. They came out like devils, howling, baying. Most of them were knucked out of their minds on baby blues and redliners. They were crazy-mad. Kill-hyped.

Everything became a blur to Zael. Overload. He froze, stock still, and screamed aloud as the frenzy exploded around him. It was too much. It was much too much.

He distinctly saw a hammer with rake-hook spin over onto his back, blood puffing from an exit wound the size of a dinner plate. He half-saw another drop to his knees, his entire face crushed by a curt little slam-punch of astonishing force delivered by the guy’s left fist. Another hammer flew past him at head height. Zael wasn’t sure if the hammer was travelling under his own momentum, or if he’d been thrown.

He heard four distinct shots, three of them the throaty roar of the Hecuter 10, one a small-cal sting-blunt. He saw a hammer down on his hands and knees, choking on his own blood, and another stagger spastically across the room to crash into a framed hololith, which he brought down on his head as he fell.

For a brief moment, Zael saw the guy, spinning on the spot, on one foot, his body bent over. His other leg was cocked out at right angles. The heavy

boot snapped a hammer's jaw as it rotated. Broken teeth ejected from the hammer's mouth.

A hammer came right at Zael. A stacker with acid-tats like smile lines and a sow's rib through his septum. He was shrieking so loud Zael couldn't hear him. The hammer's mouth was wide open and his ugula was wobbling. A grind mace cased his right fist and he was swinging it at Zael's face.

The guy thundered into the hammer from the side, deflecting his weapon. There was a brief mist of blood, and something small and soft bounced off Zael's stomach. The guy floored the hammer, broke his arm, yanked the disarticulated limb backwards, and slammed the still-spinning grind mace into the back of the hammer's skull. Zael closed his eyes just before the hot, spattery mess drenched his face.

It was all still and quiet suddenly. He opened his eyes. Eight moody hammers lay dead around the trashed gallery. The guy was sitting on his backside in front of Zael, nursing his left hand. Little jets of blood were zipping where the guy's left middle finger had previously been.

'Well, shit this,' the guy said, genuinely upset.

The finger had bounced off Zael's stomach, and was now lying on the floor at Zael's feet.

'Damn,' the guy added, pulling a little surgical clamp out of his thigh pocket and jamming it down over the digit stump.

'You're a first,' he told Zael as he got up. 'Never lost a body part until today.'

The guy seemed completely oblivious to the fact he had just taken out a room full of moody hammers, single-handed, in under ten seconds. Zael knew he'd cost the guy that finger. The guy had been saving him.

THE GUY PUSHED open the heavy tethwood doors and yelled out 'Genevieve? Genevieve X? My name is Harlon Nayl! I am a certified agent of the Inquisition!'

The X did not respond, nor did Zael expect her to, somehow. He could feel cold, exterior air blowing at him, and that was odd. Had she opened a window and run?

They went into Genny's sanctum. The guy led the way, pistol raised, blood still dripping from his clamped left hand.

Huge, floor-to-ceiling windows of stained glass threw coloured light down onto the expensive tappanacre rug.

Genevieve X sat behind her desk, staring at them. There was pretty much nothing left of her except her bloody skeleton and little torn ribbons of tissue and flesh. It looked as if her clothes, skin, body fat and muscle, her lips, her eyes... had all been ripped away. Denuded, her skeleton seemed pitifully small. The bare bones, shockingly white, were patched with blackening clots of gore and sinew. 'Damn,' breathed Harlon Nayl.

IT WAS HARD to tell beyond that black wall of smog whether the actual daylight had gone or not. Still, another day was over. Billions of lights sparkled into life across the great, black city: from the highest points of the inner spires to the skirts of the suburbs. Out of the city's heart, the Administratum clerks flowed in a monotonous grey tide. Along walkways and pavements, across pedestrian bridges and stack-level galleries, ten hundred thousand pale men and women in sombre rain-coats of emerald and black made their routine way homeward in slow procession. Many had shaven heads, or the scalp or neck punctures of neuro-link sockets. Most wore tinted goggles. None wore any kind of expression at all.

Eustis Majoris was capital-world of the Angelus sub-sector. Its heavy manufacturing industries may have begun to slump, and its fabricatory districts fall into decay, but it had one ancient craft that still thrived. It was the bureaucratic hub of two-dozen Imperial worlds. Here, in the massive ouslite towers of Formal A and Formal C, the minutiae of Imperial life was recorded, processed, evaluated, stored, examined, compared, scrutinised for levy and, ultimately, filed. There were more clerks and scribes, and more processing codifiers, in this ten kilometre square slab of

city than in all the other sub-sector worlds combined. In gilt letters above the hallway doors of the administery towers were the proud rubrics of their function: 'Knowledge is power', 'Data equals assessment, assessment equals insight, insight equals control', 'Know your codes', 'Information is truth'. All workers were encouraged to repeat such adages as mantras during work shifts.

Locally, there were other phrases that had come into coin, phrases the administery did not encourage at all. 'If something's worth doing, it's worth doing in triplicate', 'Those who shred history are doomed to repeat it' and 'I file everything, therefore I know nothing' were three of the most popular.

ANONYMOUS IN A hooded rain-cloak, Harlon Nayl still stood out. This was because he was moving against the flow. Tugging the boy along by the sleeve, he was heading into the central districts against the night's outpouring of scribes and administery functionaries. In places, he had to move aside where the rows of marching workers refused to break to let them pass. Sometimes he simply had to push his way through. But not once did such an affront provoke anything more than a slight scowl from the pale, shave-headed workers.

This was a new world to Zael. He gawped at it in a state of mounting unease. It was less than seven kilometres from the formal where he'd grown up and spent all of his however-many-it-was years. The streets and people here were cleaner than the dirty sink-stacks he thought of as homeground, but they seemed darker and totally drained of any spark. Formal J was a dump, full of no-hopers and filth, and condemned stack housing with yellow-repossession notices pasted to the doors, but at least it had some sense of life and colour. The flicking neon of the bar signs, the fire tubs, the street musicians in their gypsy finery and the smile-girls in their scabby silks.

This was different. Soulless, bitter, grimly routine, depressingly quiet. How could so many people make so little sound, Zael wondered? Just the tramp of feet, the tinny tannoy announcements from the transit stops.

‘I’d like to go home now,’ he said to Nayl.

‘Home? To that hole?’ Nayl replied, about to laugh. Then he looked around and sighed, as if to say he knew what Zael meant. To both of them, there suddenly seemed to be a huge and distinct difference between a life where hope had been crushed and a life where there had never been any hope to begin with.

THE SILENT CROWDS were thinning. They entered a very grand but depressing plaza of cold stone flags and wrought iron lamp standards. Statues lined each side of the space, acid-eaten worthies of the Imperium of Man that Zael had never heard of. Ahead was a mighty building faced in streaked black slate, its lit windows tall and very slender. It seemed big, but it was dwarfed by the gargantuan towers of the administry behind it.

There was a golden aquila on the building’s solid front, its wing tips forty metres apart. Superimposed across it was a set of scales, like the zodiac rune.

A lone figure waited for them in the centre of the plaza, made tiny by the emptiness. He stood self-consciously, as if aware he was being watched. He was adjusting his hair with the aid of a hand mirror.

‘There you are,’ he said as they came up. Then he paused and looked Zael up and down. ‘And there you are,’ he added in an uncertain tone. ‘And you are?’

‘This is Zael.’

‘My dear Harlon, you haven’t gone and found yourself a little friend have you? How absolutely darling! There’s hope for you yet.’

‘Shut the frig up, Thonius,’ Nayl snapped. ‘He’s only here because the boss wants to examine him.’

Carl Thonius pursed his lips and shrugged. ‘I see. I didn’t think he really was your type. Not enough breasts by a factor of two.’

‘Can we get on?’ Nayl snapped. ‘I take it she’s in there?’

‘That’s what we think. The local info-systems are damned hard to wire into. Actual decent Arbites cryptography for a change, wouldn’t you just

know it? But we're pretty sure she's still here. And we know who to talk to.'

'We do?'

'A deputy magistratum called Rickens. He's got the case.'

'We could just go to the top—'

Thonius shook his head. 'Only if we have to. Remember why we stealthed ourselves onto planet in the first place? This place is administry central. We go on record, the data's in the system and we're compromised. No matter how careful we are. Potentially, there's too much at stake for that.'

Nayl nodded. 'Let's go then. Where's Kys?'

'Busy,' said Thonius, with a shrug. 'Maybe onto something. You?'

'Something and nothing all at once. A zilch, probably, but an interesting one.'

'What happened to your finger?'

'The zilch I was talking about. Come on.'

With Zael in tow, they walked towards the main steps of the gloomy building.

'How do you want to play this?' Nayl asked.

'Like we did on Satre?'

'Okay, but don't namby about this time...'

TAP... TAP... TAP...

The base of a steel-shod walking cane struck the polished wooden floor. It announced the man wherever he went. People straightened up respectfully when they heard the tap approach.

Deputy Magistratum First Class Dersk Rickens came down the gloomy, panelled hallway on level nine. The two officers on duty went straight-backed smartly and opened the tall double doors for him. He acknowledged their salutes with a brief nod. They could tell he was tired. He was leaning heavily on his walking cane.

His secretary, Limbwall, hurried behind him, laden with a pile of report slates and ribboned case-folders forwarded during the course of the day from duty processing. Limbwall was a young man, prematurely bald, his underwhelming looks ruined altogether by the heavy augmetic optics implanted into his eye sockets. He'd been an administry scribe for seven years until his request for transfer/promotion had happily coincided with the deputy magistratum's written application for a scribe who could file.

Limbwall said a cheery hello to the guards as he passed by, but they ignored him. Limbwall wore the uniform – badly – but he wasn't a real marshal in their opinion. Just an ink-monkey.

Beyond the great doors of panelled oak lay Ricken's domain. A looming wooden mezzanine lit by cream-shaded electrolamps that hung on long chains. Files and slates were heaped up on the floor under the tall windows, and piled high along the tops of the battered filing chests. Mam Lotilla was dutifully processing case files at her old-model codifier, and Plyton, the savvy young junior marshal narco had sent his way, was pinning crime scene pict-stats of disembowelled bodies onto the wall boards. Beyond the mezzanine, wide wooden stairs led down into the main vault of the department, where hundreds of his officers worked at console stations or long rows of desks. A penetrating background murmur rose from the great room below.

Rickens had a headache. He'd been in budget meetings all afternoon, and they'd run over like they always did.

Sankels, the bull mastiff from interior cases, had been up to his tricks again, and had managed to get all the finance additional from narco, homicide, xen-ops, special and prohib-pub thrown out in favour of booster funds for his own office. There was cleaning to be done, he had told the chief magistratum, and the chief magistratum had agreed.

Which was all nonsense. The chief magistratum had only agreed because he knew Sankels was nose-deep with Jader Trice, the first provost of the newly formed Ministry of Sub-sector Trade, a man Rickens knew well from his numerous pict-channel interviews but had never met in person.

And that meant that Sankels had a direct line to the lord governor himself, because Trice's Ministry was the lord governor's own idea. If the chief magistratum hadn't made nice with Sankels, the chief magistratum would have been back on stack-beat in Formal X come morning.

In all truth, Rickens wondered why the city bothered with a Departamento Magistratum at all. The interior cases division was fast becoming the lord governor's own private police force. Such were the powers of a lord governor sub-sector.

His, he reminded himself, was not to reason why. His was to get the knuck on with his job and run his department to the best of his ability with increasingly limited resources.

'Good evening, deputy magistratum,' Plyton said, looking up from a close-up pict of an intestinal mass she had been turning over. She was trying to decide which way up it was supposed to go.

'Is that meant for us?' Rickens asked. 'Looks like homicide should be dealing with it.'

She shrugged. She was twenty-two years old, thick-set and fine featured. Her black leather uniform suit was always perfectly turned out, the silver marshal's crest always polished. Her dark hair was cut short to fit under her duty helmet. 'Sent it to us, sir. Said it fell into special's purview.'

Rickens headed up the Department of Special Crime. The smallest of the hive's Magistratum divisions, it was a catch-all division, designed to investigate anything that didn't neatly fall into the remits of the other departments. Special was looked on as the misfit member of the family, the unpopular cousin. The shit they got sent...

Limbwall plonked his armful of slates down on a desk, and wiped a hand across his mouth. 'Anything else, sire?' he asked.

Rickens shrugged. He was a small man in his early one-fifties, with a permanently put-upon expression. For seventy-two years, he'd walked with a limp caused by a ball-shot from a hammer's pivot-gun that went through his hip. Seventy-two years, tap... tap... tap...

'It'll have to wait,' Rickens said, tapping the pile of slates.

‘Actually, I don’t think so, chief,’ smiled Plyton. ‘This fell into our laps because the perp claimed she was an Imperial inquisitor.’

‘She what?’

Plyton shrugged. ‘And there are some people in your office. Waiting to talk to you about it.’

RICKENS’S PRIVATE OFFICE was a quiet space of dark wood and soft illumination screened from the mezzanine and the rest of the department by a panelled wall with frosted glass mullions. As he entered and closed the door behind him with a soft click, the two men waiting for him rose to their feet. Rickens tapped his way over to his carved cathedra, settled himself down and punched in a private code that brought his cogitator to life. The screen glowed green and sidelit his face. He gestured for the two men to resume their seats on the leather bench facing him.

By then, he had already made an assessment of them. Off-worlders both: an over-dressed youth and an older man, probably muscle. The youth’s body language betrayed confidence. The older man was unreadable, but then muscle usually was, in Rickens’s ample experience. Until the split-second it decided to act.

He called up the file onto screen, and carefully set his half-moon spectacles on his face.

‘What we seem to have... a female, lacking citizen validation, work dockets, status codes or visitation permits... physical age twenty-five years standard by approximation, though some traces of juvenat procedures... apprehended in an undersink of Formal D this afternoon having just killed or crippled seven individuals, all local males. The female refuses to answer any questions, but on apprehension she identified herself as Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor.’

Rickens took off his spectacles and looked up at the two men. ‘This is an old fashioned world, perhaps behind the times with cutting Imperium fashions, but I believe Gideon is still a name reserved for the male gender?’

‘It is,’ said the well-dressed youth.

‘So, this female is lying?’

‘Yes,’ the youth replied cordially. ‘And no. We request you release her into our custody.’

‘She is a friend of yours?’ Rickens asked.

‘A colleague,’ said the youth.

A friend,’ the muscle said quietly.

‘Given her crimes, I really can’t see how—’

The youth leaned forward, interrupting Rickens, and set a small black wallet on the table in front of him. Rickens flipped it open. The light of the electrolamps glinted off the Inquisitorial rosette.

Rickens didn’t react. He took a scanner wand from his jacket and played it across the badge.

‘Stackers have been known to fabricate this sort of thing out of tin and glass,’ he said. He sat back and regarded the wand’s readout. ‘This, however, is genuine. Which one of you is Ravenor?’

‘Neither,’ said the younger man. ‘Like the female in your custody, we both work for him. I repeat my request.’

Rickens drummed his fingers together. ‘It’s not that simple. Not at all.’

‘You would impede the operation of the Holy Inquisition, deputy magistratum?’

‘Throne of Terra, of course not,’ Rickens looked at the young man. ‘But there are protocols. Procedures. I know the Inquisition has the power to run rough-shod over every law and statute on Eustis Majoris. It may demand the release of an accredited agent. But... I would expect such a demand to come from the Officio Inquisitorus Planetia itself. Formally. Not like this.’

‘Inquisitor Ravenor does not wish this matter to become formal at all, deputy magistratum,’ said the older man softly. ‘It would... I’m sorry, it might... jeopardise the entire nature of our investigation here. We want our colleague returned to us, and all data surrounding her arrest erased.’

‘That is beyond my power.’

‘Not at all,’ said the younger man. He leaned forward again. ‘I see the case file on your display still has a green tag. It is pending, subject to you processing it. You could erase it here. Now. With a touch of your keypad.’

‘I would be betraying my office,’ said Rickens.

‘You would be serving your Emperor,’ said the younger man.

The other man said nothing, and that’s what did it. Deputy Magistratum Rickens was not easily intimidated, but there was something about the unreadable face of the older man. Rickens had a sudden image of himself, dead in his old, carved cathedra, while these two ominous servants of the Inquisition slipped away into the night. And all for what? For sticking to his tired principles?

Rickens believed in Imperial justice, and these days he got damned little chance of taking legal action at all thanks to the powers that be. Who was he to stand in the face of the real thing, however unorthodox?

‘Very well,’ he said and tapped an erasure code into his cogitator. ‘You may collect your colleague from holding pen nine at the south entry.’

‘Thank you, deputy magistratum. Your efforts will not be forgotten.’

THE TWO MEN had only been gone ten minutes when Plyton knocked and entered the office cautiously.

‘Sir?’ she asked. ‘All my files on that Ravenor case have... uhm... gone.’

‘I know.’

‘What did those men say to you?’

‘Forget it, Plyton. Erase it from your mind.’

‘But sir—’

‘Do as I say, Plyton. No good will come of it.’

ONE OF SONSAL’S staff had voxed ahead to inform the house of his master’s dinner plans. When the motor-carriage swept them in under the rain-proofed portico, servants were waiting for them in the courtyard.

Sonsal descended from the carriage and courteously handed Kys down to the pavement.

The house, like those of all Petropolis's worthies, was on the surface level. Despite the burning curse of the rain, it was thought improper for the wealthy and the respectable to dwell in the deep sinks. Sonsal's house was in Formal B, one of the three core districts of the city-hive, and the only one given over exclusively to residential buildings. To the north and west rose the many massive towers of A and C, the hub of sub-sector bureaucracy and government.

Sonsal conducted Kys into the atrium, where floating glow-globes cast a shimmering yellow light. The walls were lined with hand-printed paper showing a repeat print pattern of the holy skull-cog in gold leaf. More iconography of the Adeptus Mechanicus decorated the iron staircase. Engine Imperial was proud of its association with the machine cult. Like other incorporated commercial firms, it leased tech processes and construction secrets from the guild, and manufactured them under license. The great financial return made it worth the huge lease fees and the pressure of regular inspection.

Ewer bearers waited for them, and they washed their hands and faces clean of air-pollution in silver dishes of clean water.

Sonsal invited her to wait in the inner chambers. 'I have a small piece of business to attend to, then I will be with you.'

'I'll be waiting,' she said, tense with the terrible effort of being suggestive.

ALONE, KYS RELAXED and paced in an ornate apartment. A carpet of woven silver thread filigree covered the black tile floor, and the pink-upholstered furniture had heavy, gilt feet and arms. Lead-glass cabinets displayed various pieces of klaylware, and there were a number of ugly oil paintings and hololiths on the walls

'You with me?' she said quietly.

+I am.+

‘You’re very faint. Why is that?’

+I’m tired. That, and the landspar. Very heavy, very dense. Most of the residences in Formal B are made from it. It is particularly resistant to the acidic rain. A rich man does not want to lose status by having his house crumble around him, after all.+

‘So?’

+It’s psi-inert. Dead stone. It’s all I can do to hear you and let you hear me.+

She frowned. ‘All right, don’t wear yourself out. I’ll call if I need you.’

She strolled around the room, thought-feeling for niches, hidden panels, hiding places, though she doubted Sonsal would be foolish enough to keep anything in a public room. There was a panel, however, in the west wall, the size of a small door. She could sense its hollowness. She traced its catch mechanism delicately with her mind, and then popped it open. The panel swung inward. Behind it was a small, private study, lined with shelves of books, slates and wafers. There was a desk, and a leather suspensor chair.

She turned her head slowly, feeling around. A particular density in the third drawer down on the left side of the desk.

The drawer’s lock was significantly more complex than those of the other seven drawers. It refused to pop with a simple, blunt thought-thrust. She was forced to analyse it, component by component, comparing and matching tumblers and pins. The intense mental effort made her perspire. Finally, with a triumphant blink, she turned the last drum and heard the lock click.

Kys reached out a hand and started to slide the drawer open. She saw three, small red-tissue packets lying on top of several envelopes.

She heard a door handle turn. She slammed the drawer shut and dashed back into the public apartment, taking a seat by the heavy, leaded window just before Sonsal came in.

‘My dear, are you all right? You look slightly flushed.’

‘I’m fine,’ she said. He was coming towards her. She saw that, in her haste, she had not pulled the panel door into the study fully shut. Another step, and he would see it.

‘Just a little warm,’ she smiled, standing up quickly and undoing the top four clasps of her dark brown bodysuit. His hungry attention was immediately focused on the exposed V of white skin. Kys took advantage of his distraction and hooked her mind around the lip of the panel door, snapping it flush.

‘Dinner is served,’ he said. ‘Shall we?’

THE FOOD WAS excellent. Little bowls of spiced goshran, followed by stuffed pettifowls that had been imported from off-world, then a kuberry sorbet wrapped in a parchment of filo pastry. The sommelier kept their glasses filled with a series of fine wines that matched each course to perfection. When Sonsal wasn’t looking, Kys glanded an antioxidant to keep her head clear. His conversation was poor. He kept telling her about the various vintages, how difficult some had been to procure, how hard it was to import decent pettifowl these days, the secret of the spices that made the difference between good goshran and great goshran. He wanted to impress, and like many wealthy, empty men, his conspicuous wealth was the only thing he could think of using.

She nodded and smiled, and hung on his every word through sheer force of will. Her act was working. They both drank too much, but where she was glanded against it, he became loose-tongued and over-familiar. Gently, she mind-stirred the air-molecules around him, heating him up and making him sweat. Then she started to custom-build her own pheromones to suit his very-readable templates, and steer them towards him. By the end of the meal, he was intoxicated in more ways than one.

He ordered the sommelier to pour them a large amasec each, and then dismissed him and all the serving staff.

Sonsal raised his glass, dabbing his sweaty neck with his other hand. ‘My dear Patience,’ he said. ‘This evening has been a delight. The entire day

too. I have placed my purchases in the vault. Perhaps we could go and admire them later? I have some other pieces you might find most enchanting.'

'That would be nice,' she smiled.

'I want to thank you again,' he said.

'Please, Umberto. There's no need. This fine meal has been more than enough. You're spoiling me.'

'Impossible!' he declared. 'Nothing could spoil a woman of such infinite beauty.'

'Umberto, you will turn my head with such compliments.'

'Such a fine head. Of such infinite beauty,' he said, getting up badly and sloshing his drink.

She kept a smile on her face, but watched him carefully.

'How is your amasec, Patience? It's forty year-old Zukanac, from the mountains of Onzio.'

'It is wonderful, but I fear I have drunk too much already. Any more, and I might forget myself.'

He leered.

'My tolerance for good drink is low these days,' she continued. 'It dulls the senses, don't you find? I have travelled widely, and know there are other intoxicants that freshen and clear the mind most wonderfully. Sadly none are available on such a proper world as Eustis Majoris.'

He considered this for a moment. 'You never did tell me what you do,' he said.

'I have a modest, private income. I travel. I explore. It is most... liberating.'

He nodded knowingly. 'Then you are open to experiences. How delightful. Set your amasec aside, Patience. I have something else you might enjoy.'

He walked unsteadily over to the hidden panel door, opened it and disappeared for a moment. When he came back, he was cupping something

in his hand. 'I think you'll find Eustis Majoris is less proper than you thought. This will clear our heads. It will relax and refresh us. So that we might enjoy the rest of this perfect night.'

Kys made sure the smile she gave him showed nothing but total approval of that prospect.

TWO, SMALL HARD shapes, each one wrapped in red tissue paper. He led her by the hand over to a chaise and set the red parcels down on the lacquered top of the low table nearby.

Then he kissed her.

'What are these?' she asked. It had taken a great deal of resolve to accept the kiss and not kill him with a sternum punch.

'They are flects. Have you heard of them?'

'No,' she said. 'Umberto, I thought you might have been talking about obscura or lucidia.'

'Obscura is far too addictive and debilitating for a man of my station,' he said, sitting down beside her. 'And lucidia is too coarse. It has an unpleasant low, I find.'

'These flects then... what are they?'

'Like nothing else. Wonderful. Liberating. New. You will not be disappointed.'

He began to unwrap one, slowly teasing out the tissue paper.

'Where do they come from?' she asked. He shrugged. 'I mean, how do you come by them?'

He finished his amasec and set the glass down. 'I have a contact. A fellow who provides. It is very unofficial. Now then—'

She reached out a hand and set it on his. Then she leaned forward so her mouth was very close to his ear. 'There's something you should know, Umberto,' she said.

'What... what is that?'

‘I am an agent of the Imperial Inquisition, and you are in very big trouble indeed.’

SONSAL STARTED TO cry. Sobbing at first, then deep bellows of despair woven up with anger. He curled up on the chaise like a child, kicking his feet.

‘Shut up,’ she said.

His weeping became so loud, the apartment door opened, and a houseman peered in.

‘Go away,’ Kys said, slamming the door shut with a stern blink.

‘Please! Please!’ Sonsal sobbed.

‘Shut up. I won’t lie. This is not good for you.’

‘My office! I will be disgraced... sacked! Oh, God-Emperor, my life is at an end!’

She stood facing him. ‘Disgrace? Yes, most likely. An end to your illustrious career with Engine Imperial? I should think so. A prison term, with hard labour? You can probably bet on that. But if you think this is the end of your life, you are sadly mistaken. You have no idea how bad life can get before it ends. Trust me.’

‘P-please!’

‘Umberto? Are you listening to me? Umberto?’

‘Yes?’

‘Stop sobbing and pull yourself together, or I’ll introduce you to the nine principles of real pain. You believe me when I say I can do that, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’ She crouched down facing him, and he shrank away, wiping snot from his nose, his eyes puffy and red. His scale lorifications had partially extended across his face, triggered by his weeping. ‘You are in the hands of the Inquisition now, Umberto Sonsal. It requires information from you. Your real fate depends upon the fullness of your answers.’

Sniffing, he sat up. 'H-how do I know you're not lying?'

She reached into her thigh pocket and fished out the rosette.

'See?'

He started to cry again.

'Oh, shut up! Umberto, picture the near future... the many possible near futures. On one extreme, I walk out of this room and leave you here to get on with your empty, privileged life. You never see me again, and the Inquisition never comes to your door. To reach that future, you have to answer every question I ask you to my satisfaction.'

'All right...'

'Here's the other extreme. You answer badly. I kill you, here and now, and drop your fat corpse into the river.'

His lip began to tremble and his eyes filled with tears again. She could tell he was fighting hard to stay in control. As hard as she had done to pretend to like him.

'In between those extremes, there is the future where I expose you, drag you to the marshals, get you charged and locked up and generally ruin the rest of your miserable frigging existence.'

'I understand.'

'And there's one final extreme. An extreme extreme. Far worse than me just killing you and dumping your corpse. I call my superiors and they take you away. What happens to you after that is, I can assure you, far worse than a quick death. So... which future do you like the look of best?'

'The one where you walk away.'

'Good. Who is your dealer?'

Sonsal rocked back on the couch. 'He'll kill me,' he said.

'Futures, Umberto, extremes...'

'All right! His name is Drase Bazarof.'

'And who is that?'

'One of my line chiefs at Engine. He's sink-scum. But he knows people.'

'Where does he live?'

‘I don’t know! A sink-stack somewhere! I don’t socialise with scum like that!’

‘But his residence will be logged on your personnel manifest, right?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘We’ll look in a moment,’ she said. She walked over to the dining table and took a slug of her amasec. ‘Who does he supply? Besides you?’

‘He keeps his business out of the workplace except for me. The machine guild inspects our premises so often. But he’s said things to me about his stack. He sells there, I think.’

‘He has a supplier. I mean, he must get these things from somewhere. He doesn’t make them.’

‘I have no idea who. You’ll have to ask him.’

‘I will. Calm down, Umberto. You’re quaking like a leaf.’

‘I’m scared. I’m scared of you. I’m jumpy. Would it be all right if I just used this look to calm my nerves and—’

‘You’re kidding, aren’t you?’

He hung his head and gazed at the tiled floor.

‘Where’s your manifest?’ she asked.

SONSAL ACCESSED HIS work database using a codifier in the corner of the apartment. His hands were shaking. The codifier was a curved valve screen set over an intricate mechanism of brass tubes and wires. The enamel keys of the touchboard had long, stiff arms.

Sonsal pulled up the Engine Imperial info-strata, opened the various document files with his personal codes, and decompressed the manifest. Then he left her to read it and wandered back to the couch shakily.

Kys used an alphabetiser to locate Bazarof, punched up his address, and memorised it. For good measure, she skin-wrote it too, on her left forearm, gently mind-nudging pores open and closed to form a pattern visible only by microscope.

She checked her chronometer. It was late.

‘Ravenor?’

Nothing.

She sighed. She was about to get up when she heard a snuffling noise.

At first, she couldn’t work out what it was. An insect caught in the windowlights, maybe. A poor piece of plumbing. She looked around.

The noise was coming from Sonsal. He was getting to his feet, jerking and twitching, and shuffling backwards, sliding the chaise across the tiles.

She knew at once he’d used a flect while she wasn’t looking. Damn him! Damn her! She should have kept an eye on him. He’d been so scared, so dreadfully strung out that he’d looked for an escape, even a temporary one.

‘Sonsal? Sonsal!’

His head was bucking around, dystonically. His eyes had rolled back. Shit, was this normal? Was this what flect’s did? Sonsal kept backing away so violently that the chaise overturned with a crash.

‘Sonsal!’

He seemed to hear her voice. He staggered away, moving backwards as if in fear, and slammed through the panel door into the study.

‘Damn it!’ she cried.

The main doors pushed open and two of Sonsal’s bodyguards looked in.

‘Sire? Are you all right?’ one called.

‘Get the hell out!’ Kys yelled, and with a nod of her head slid the entire dining table down the length of the room, crockery and glassware tumbling off it. It slammed into the doors and pushed them shut. Outside, the bodyguards began hammering and kicking at the blocked entrance.

Kys ran into the study. The desk was askew, and several drawers had been pulled out. A door out into the hall stood open.

‘Sonsal!’

She ran out into the hall. The glow-globes were set to low burn. As soon as she appeared, the bodyguards ceased their hammering and ran at her. She deflected one with a rolling kick and punched the other off his feet into the wall.

Sonsal, still jerking and twitching, was backing up the grand staircase away from her. Blood was leaking out of his mouth and one eye had closed. Terrified household staff members appeared in doorways and peered out. They all vanished, shrieking, when Sonsal started shooting.

It was a small-calibre slide-away, a sleeve piece. He must have got it from his desk. Blindly, he fired it down the staircase as he went up backwards. Shots pinged off the marble treads and twanged away from the iron rails.

Kys had no gun to return fire with. She ducked into cover and crooked her left wrist backwards, drawing the long, handle-less kineblade out of her bodyglove sleeve with a jerk of her telekinesis. The twelve-centimetre blade hovered in the air. ‘Put the gun down, Umberto!’ she yelled. He fired back at her, blowing out a dusty hole in the wall’s plasterwork beside her head. Another shot took a huge mirror off its wall-hooks. It splintered on the landing floor.

With a fierce burst of directed telekinesis, she leapt out into the open. The kineblade zoomed up the stairs and pinned Sonsal’s left sleeve to the banister rail. At the same moment, she plucked the slide-away clean out of his hand and whipped it through the air.

She caught the gun neatly, and aimed it back at him.

‘That’s enough!’

He was still shaking and vibrating, frantic. His pinned sleeve seemed to distress him more than anything, and Kys realised it was because he could no longer back away.

‘Right, Umberto! Right! I’m coming up there! Calm down and I’ll—’

Sonsal pulled at the pinned sleeve, tore it away, and staggered backward at the same moment. Suddenly freed, he slipped and went over the stair rail, shoulders first.

Two storeys to the marble floor of the atrium.

She looked away. Even the bone and mush sound of impact was bad enough.

‘Shit,’ she said. Alarms were ringing right through the house. People were screaming.

She retrieved her kineblade, went to the south exit, and let herself out.



THREE

SHE MELTED AWAY through shadows, through the city darkness. I kept watch over her as soon as she was clear of the house's blinding landspar. From the mosaic of her raw, surface thoughts, I reconstructed the events up to Sonsal's death. Her mind presented an indifference, but I could tell it was forced. She was troubled, alone, and a little scared. Patience Kys hid many things well – her true name, for example – and all who met her thought her hard and callous. But I knew better. Not because I could see her vulnerable side – she wouldn't allow that – but because I knew it was there. I could hear its hollow echo when I tapped gently against her mind, as a man might knock to hear the leaden sound of a hidden alcove behind a wood panel.

Alarm protocols had drawn the marshals to the neighbourhood of Sonsal's house, along with other, less identifiable officials. My mind lingered with her for some minutes as she hid in a temple porch while fast-dispatch cruisers and prowl-tracks scoured the streets. The Petropolitan authorities took the security of their richest and most privileged citizens very seriously. This was the second time in the space of a day my people had run foul of the Magistratum.

At the warning sirens from Sonsal's house, the other residences in the street fortified themselves automatically, like herd animals reacting to the distress signals of one of their number. Gates and doors were mag-locked, window shutters furlled into place, and roof armour, designed primarily to guard against rain, clattered out into full extension. I could feel the tense sensor-cones of alert-ready sentry servitors, taste the ozone stink of electrified wall-tops, and smell the stirring heat of suddenly armed anti-personnel mines.

Sonsal's terrified householders had already furnished the marshals with a description of a single assailant. Thirty-five minutes after she had quit the south entry, Kys was still no more than a half kilometre from Sonsal's house, and seven hundred and seventy-three armed officers were hunting for her.

It was time to even the odds a little. I directed her north, towards a high-rise section of Formal B known as the Staebes, where wealthy young professionals lived in their own, opulent version of the city's lamented hab-stacks. The architect had had a keen sense of irony.

Kys plied the shadows, forced to keep to the surface streets because the crime-alert had locked out all the descender wells into the sub-levels. I wanted to speed her on her way with minimal fuss and attention. Distractions were needed.

I left her and drifted on to a transit control office on Staebes circle. There, with a little effort, I planted the image of a lone female, running scared, in the mind of the shift supervisor. He would later swear on the aquila that he'd seen the woman on a security pict transmitted from the outbound platform of the Gill Park mag-lev station. His urgent call swarmed the manhunt in that direction.

Continuing west, I located by chance three Munitorum contractors performing after-hours repairs on an electrical supply sub-station behind Lontwick Arch. I rested gently in the forebrain of one of them for a few minutes, figured him out, and guided his hands. By the time I departed, he had misconnected two street-quarter grids and caused a blackout across eight city blocks. It took the trio seventeen minutes to repair the fault and restore power. They spent a good ten minutes of that time in fierce argument as to which of them could have been damn fool enough to cross-wire in the first place. The blackout, suspicious to say the least, surged the manhunt round again, splitting it, confusing the searchers.

By then, Kys was crossing the pedestrian footbridge across the hydroelectric canyon that divided B from E.

There, she was nearly caught. A Magistratum flier, cruising overhead, caught her on sight. I got into the observer's mind just in time to block his recognition. The flier moved on, stab-lights scissoring, blind to her.

Kys was now moving south, down through Formal E. Under the ironwork walkways and tinted glass roofs the streets were busy. Surface E was a popular zone for bohemian dining houses and drinking parlours, frequented by the rich from the high rent neighbourhoods over the canyon. Here, the marshals had ditched their transports and were moving through the crowd. Many were covert officers. The patrons of surface E did not take well to armoured marshals tramping through their midst.

It was hard to watch them all at once. Hundreds of minds, hundreds of personalities, some of them intoxicated, some of them high. The minds of the non-uniformed marshals were disguised by their well-rehearsed cover identities.

+Get into that cafe. Buy a drink and sit in the far end booth.+

Kys obeyed. I had to get her off the street. I'd just sensed two detective chasteners closing through the crowds towards her.

The cafe-bar was small, and lit by glow-globes so tar-stained they shone orange. Kys bought a thimble of sweet black caffeine and sat where I had instructed her. There were nine other customers, all middle-aged, sallow men in black clothing. They chatted in low, tired voices. Each one had ordered a large mug of foamed milk-caff.

They seemed sinister. For a moment, I feared I'd directed Kys into a den frequented by some form of secret police.

It was not so. Three doors down from the cafe-bar was the Elandra crematorium. The custom on Eustis Majoris was for sombre, evening funerals. The men were all paid mourners and hearse drivers, taking a respite during the long service before returning to perform their duties on the way to the wake. They sipped cheap amasec and grain liquor covertly from cuff-flasks, and smoked short, fat obscura sticks with hardpaper filters. When they departed, the cooling milk-caffs were left untouched on their benches. The bar owner cleared them without a shrug. The mourners

were regulars, the untouched caffeines their way of paying for a seat out of the evening chill.

‘Where now?’ she asked, stepping into the cold night again.

+Follow the street down to the mag-lev station, and take the second through train to the Leahwood end stop. I’ll join you again shortly.+

I was confident she was clear now. I wanted to backtrack and see what I could learn from those hunting for her.

THE MAGISTRATUM MANHUNT was running out of steam. I touched mind after mind, and felt only the spectacularly ordinary sensations of everyday marshals. Wariness, weariness, gripes about too-tight boots or too-loose jacket armour, worries about pension prospects, longings for the end of the evening shift. Occasionally, I brushed by the thoughts of a more senior officer, and felt the agitation of failure, of crime-solution quotas not met.

I circled back as far as Sonsal’s house. The psychic contour map of the city was still lit up, livid with recent trauma. There were flavours of pain and shock, worry and hysteria in the air here. I filtered out the sobbing housemaids, the damaged pain-throb of the bodyguards, the job worries of the butler, the seen-it-all dismissal of the *medicae mortus* scooping Sonsal’s ruptured cadaver into a linen sack.

I found the officer in charge, a marshal called Frayn Tode. He was afraid, and that surprised me. He was standing in the atrium, gazing down at the awful splash of blood on the marble. The dominating strands of his thought processes were as obvious as the layers of a sliced cake. An unsolved crime against one of the formal’s most respected was foremost of his worries. His wife, eight and a half months pregnant, was a distracting layer just under the icing. But he was afraid too.

What of? Why?

I waited to see. Three men walked over to join him, and his fear level rose. I tried to see them through his eyes, but he was resolutely avoiding them. I skipped away, and entered the mind of a mortuary attendant, who was waiting nearby to ship the gurney.

Three men. All dressed in tailored grey suits of the finest murray. One was tall and imposing, very wide, bigger even than Nayl, but he held back. Stepping forward was a well-made, more slender man with a combed chin-beard and tied-back black hair. His face was lean, hard-set, dangerous. The third man was a little, thin wretch with a balding blond scalp and fierce blue eyes.

‘D’you know who I am?’ the slender man with the tied-back hair asked. His voice was slick, like flowing honey.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Totle. ‘I recognise you from the news-picts and—’

‘Well, that’s great,’ the slender man said. ‘You can, I’m sure, understand why we have an interest here?’

‘The flects, sir.’

‘Yes, the flects. The death of an august citizen like Sonsal is grievous enough, but the dissolute manner of his life that has consequently been revealed...’

‘I’ll keep the press out, sir,’ Totle said.

‘Yes, you damn well will!’ said the slender man. He paused, staring at the marshal. ‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘I’m... I’m surprised to see you here, sir. Dealing with this matter personally.’

‘I take my duties seriously, marshal,’ the slender man said.

Who the hell was this? I wanted to know. I slid out of the mortuary attendant, who sighed gently as if waking from a dream, and moved closer to Totle and the trio. I reached out.

I got a brief taste of cold metal and power, a caustic spittle of danger and ambition. I got close enough to read the surface thoughts of the big man and know his name was Ahenobarb and he was hired muscle of the most dangerous kind. Then I reached out towards the slender man’s mind.

The little blond wretch turned and looked at me. I wasn’t there, but he saw me anyway. Saw my face, into my mind, my body and my soul, my birth and the lives of the generations before me. He was a psyker of

appalling power. With just one look, he ripped into me and almost exposed me altogether.

‘Kinsky? What is it?’ the slender man said suddenly, seeing his companion stiffen.

‘Thought pirate,’ Kinsky replied. He was still staring at me, his blue eyes burning into my head.

I started to retreat. I threw up three mind-walls to cover my escape, but he punched through them as if they were paper. He left his body and came rushing after me.

As I soared up into the roof of the atrium, I saw his body go limp and fold. The big minder – Ahenobarb – caught him expertly before he fell, as if well practised.

Kinsky came up after me. Non-corporeal, he took the form of a ball of fire, fizzling the same blue-white as his eyes. I could feel the steel-hard lattices of his thought-traps closing on me and blocking my escape.

‘What is your name?’ he demanded, without words.

‘Screw you is my name,’ I replied, and thrust out at him with a charged mind dagger that formed, sharp and scarlet, in the air before me.

The ball of blue fire knocked it aside and chuckled. ‘Is that the best you’ve got, screw you is my name?’

I had been inhabiting a small, fragile sylph of white light, but in the face of the oncoming blue fireball, I resolved my non-corporeal self and became an eldar *kon-miht*, furious, winged and golden. I had been tempted to become an aquila, but I didn’t want this mind-warrior to gather any clues.

The fireball balked slightly at the sight of me renewed. Then it surged on, forming ectoplasmic skins of milky flame around itself. I could feel it pressing at my heart, reaching for my home form.

Circling away, up through the atrium ceiling and out into the night air, I raised more fundamental barriers. Thorn-walls, memory-barbs and dense, delaying layers of crackling *déjà-vu*.

This Kinsky was good. Frighteningly so. He did not even begin to sidestep my countermeasures. He went through them, disintegrating them. The psi-echo shattered the glass roof of the atrium and all below scattered for cover from the cascading debris.

Kinsky dragged his trap lattices shut around me. I broke through the first, and then struggled to find a chink in the second. He was laughing. He spat darts of pure pain into my golden flanks.

With sheer force of will, I broke out of his trap. The psi-shockwave burst windows down the entire length of the street, and ripped security shutters off their hinge-mounts. I doubled back and started to flee down the road, feeling the dazed Magistratum officers picking themselves up from the asphalt. Kinsky, whirring now with the guttural throb of the warp, pursued. The bow-wave of his mind sent Magistratum vehicles and officers flying on either side. Cruisers overturned, buckling and exploding. Men flew backwards into walls and armoured windows.

He was fast. He was faster than me. Stronger than me. His mind was like a daemon-engine.

I soared like a comet out over Formal B into the dark streets of Formal E. He closed on me, like a murder-star, blazing through the heavens. Windows cracked and roof tiles rippled away in the wake of our chase. I went low under the iron bridge at F crossing. He punched through the girder bars, leaving ectoplasm crackling along the handrail. At Tangley Tower, I banked left. He came right through the huge building, filling the minds of the sleeping occupants with nightmares. Two of them had terminal heart attacks. I could feel their lives shutting off as I climbed away through the steep ranges of the administry towers.

With a blue-flame wink, he closed another vice. Bear-trap jaws of agony bit into the trailing limb of my gracious eldar form. I lurched to a halt. My inaudible screams of pain rattled windows and dislodged slates in the city below me.

Kinsky was closing, the blue fireball now transmuting into the form of a black-pelted predator with a gaping maw.

When an animal is caught in a trap, it often gnaws its own leg off to be free. Anguished, I severed a part of myself, left a part of my soul quivering between the brutal teeth of the vice, and fled.

I could not fight him. Extended like this, I had nothing like his power. Wounded and hurting, I dropped like a stone into a busy manufactory in E. The furnace pits were blowing sparks, and sweating figures with shroud masks were drawing up the smelting ingots. I fell directly down into one of the workers, a second-line boss called Usno Usnor. I made myself him and hid in his heat-rattled brain.

The blue fireball came down through the roof, hesitated, and hovered slowly along the work line. It examined each mind one by one. It probed close. I forgot myself, forgot Gideon Ravenor, and became Usno Usnor. My back ached. My hugely muscled arms glistened with sweat as I wrenched another ingot out of the flames. White heat in my face. Another half-hour until the whistle blew shift-change. I was Usno Usnor, torso stung with heat, arms tired, worried that the foreman would dock my pay for being three minutes late on platform today, worried about my wife who had the ague, worried about my son who was mixing with the moodys and had just got an acid-tat, worried about the food-pail I had left under number five alloy-finer. The others would eat it if they found it. There was good pressed meat in there, and bread, and a cup of pickles...

The blue fireball hovered over the work line for several minutes, and then, frustrated, flew up and away out through the roof.

MUCH LATER: A vacant lot between hab-stacks in Formal M, a deep pit of jumbled rockcrete and collected pools of rainwater exuding the acrid stink of sulphur.

M was an especially decaying sub-borough, famished by a forty year long downward arc in trade. Many of the six century-old stacks had been cleared by optimistic landlords hoping to raise new cheap pre-habs and cash in on the worker influx to the petrofactory combine when new contracts came through. But the promised contracts had never been

honoured. The combine had closed. The razed sites – some cleared to their sink levels – remained as gaping pits between crumbling stacks.

Kys walked out across the bottom of the open hole, gazing up at the mouldering rockcrete shells around her. The only light came from oil-drum fires in some of the neighbouring ruins that warmed dispossessed families. She could see them flicker at high, ragged holes that had once been windows until the glass and metal frames had been robbed and sold.

‘In one piece, I see,’ said a voice. She didn’t bother to turn. Carl Thonius appeared out of the shadows to her left, screwing up the lid of a silver hip-flask.

‘In one piece,’ she replied.

Kara Swole appeared to her right, looking tired and haggard. ‘I understand you’ve caused as much hoo-ha as me,’ she said.

Kys shrugged.

‘Now we’re all here, I suggest we don’t waste any more time,’ Harlon Nayl said from the shadows behind her. Kys sighed. She’d been able to sense Thonius and Swole waiting, but Nayl had fooled her, as usual. He looked grumpy. He was dragging a scruffy street kid along by the wrist.

‘Who’s that?’ Kys asked.

‘This is Zael. He’s coming with us,’ Nayl said curtly. He looked over at Thonius. ‘Bring it in, would you?’

Thonius walked over into the centre of the derelict lot and produced a guide beacon from his coat. It was a chrome cylinder no larger than a spice grinder. He twisted the top of it and set it on the ground. A pattern of tiny green lights flashed in repeats around its sides. Kys could just feel the sub sonic pulse.

As they drew back to the edges of the lot, Kys said, ‘So what? A pick up? He wants us back at the ship, does he?’

‘No,’ said Nayl.

She heard the gentle hum of cowlings-suppressed landing thrusters from above them. A black shape appeared overhead against the dark froth of the clouds. The lander descended slowly, vertically, into the demolition cavity.

The vehicle was unlit. Even the running lights were off. The only illumination came from the faint green instrumentation behind the canopy and the hot-blue bursts of exhaust from the jets. As it came in, skeletal landing gear unfolded from the belly with a hydraulic moan. For the last few seconds before touchdown, they had to turn their faces away as the jets lifted grit and dust and created a vortex in the squalid confines of the pit.

The jets died away to nothing. Like a squid's beak, the nose hatch articulated open. An object rather than a figure emerged, gliding down the ramp on silent anti-grav suspensors.

'By the Throne,' Kys said 'When was the last time he came in person?'

'WE'VE NOT HAD a good day, have we?' Gideon Ravenor said. His tone was tired, but it was impossible to assess his actual demeanour. The voxsponder system of the force chair that did his talking for him washed out inflection.

'Not bad, exactly,' said Harlon Nayl.

'No, not bad,' echoed Thonius.

'Though not entirely great, either,' admitted Kara Swole. Her voice was husky, and there were dark rings around her eyes as if she hadn't slept in a month.

'Bad enough for you to come,' Kys said pointedly. The sealed chair unit, matt-dull and intimidating, rotated slowly to face her.

'Indeed,' replied the colourless voxsponder voice. 'Looks like I won't be able to protect you effectively from orbit. I feel a more intimate range is necessary. Let us get into concealment before we talk further.'

There was a muted acoustic click from the chair as Ravenor sent a vox-signal they couldn't hear to the waiting lander. Two figures emerged at once from the hatch and strode over to them. Then the jets cycled up again and the unseen pilot steered the lander up and away into the dark.

The inquisitor had brought Zeph Mathuin and the blunter named Wystan Frauka with him. Ravenor clearly wasn't taking any chances. Mathuin –

tall and dark-skinned, with long ropes of tightly braided hair hanging down the back of his leather storm coat – was muscle, plain and simple. He'd been part of the team for three years, and no one knew much about his past, except that – like Nayl – he'd once operated as a licensed bounty hunter in the outworlds. His eyes were little coals of red hard light framed in the slits of his lids. He had a handgun already drawn, stiff at his side in his right hand, and his left hand was pushed into his coat pocket to brace against the weight of a heavy kitbag slung over his shoulder. He nodded a brief acknowledgement at Nayl as he came up – out of professional respect, mainly – but ignored the others. Mathuin didn't mix well, so Ravenor usually held him in reserve, but he liked to bring him along when he had to act in person; there was no doubting the ex-hunter's skills.

Kys sighed when she saw Frauka. Considering he never played any physical part in their activities, Wystan Frauka was a hefty man – big-boned and broad, with a touchy, diffident manner. His hair was dyed black and neatly trimmed, his clean-shaven face craggy, mocking and lazy. Technically, he was almost sexy in a weather-beaten, exotic way, but the basic essence of him repelled Kys. The blankness, the nothingness. As he approached, he took a pack of lho-sticks from the hip pocket of his well-tailored, sober suit. He slowly tapped one out and lit it. Then, with a fork of blue smoke exhaling carelessly from his nostrils, he nodded at Kys, a little appreciative nod, his eyes wickedly narrowed.

She turned away. For now, at least, Frauka was wearing his limiter, but there would be a time, probably quite soon, when that limiter would be deactivated, and she'd have to tolerate the numbing void of his being. The attribute made him indispensable as well as unpalatable.

Under Nayl's lead, the group left the pit and entered a sub-level of the rotting hab adjacent to it. The place had been gutted. Seeping rain-burn had eaten away the ply-board tiles of the suspended ceilings to reveal cavity spaces of corroded wiring, decomposing insulation and scabby stonework. The beams of their lamp-packs stabbed through the dripping gloom, revealing rust-streaked, mould-blotched wall boards with sticky

folds of shed lining paper concertinaed at the skirting, piles of trash, nitrate-burned carpets, doorless holes.

Once they were deep inside the rain, Ravenor selected a usable room. It had been a communal lounge shared by all the habs on that landing, larger than the individual living spaces and – because it was at the centre of the block – more intact. Wet rot had got into it, blackening the ceiling, covering the now skeletal furniture frames with fungal growths, and curling the barely readable paste-boards and notices away from the wall. Washroom rosters, rent association announcements, hiring lists, uplifting motto cards and scriptural quotes distributed by the ministoram.

They entered, and assembled loosely around Ravenor as he illuminated the chamber with a wash of yellow light from his force chair's lamps.

'Wystan, if you wouldn't mind?' the voxsponder said. Frauka nodded, switched his lho-stick to his other hand, and reached into his jacket. This was the moment Kys had prepared herself for.

Wystan Frauka was one of those rare beings known as a blunter or 'untouchable'. It wasn't just that he was a non-psyker – like the majority of humans – he was the antithesis of a psyker. His mind was psi-inert. It could not be read or probed by a psyker, nor could it even be detected. Moreover, it totally inhibited psychic activity in his immediate location. The moment the limiter was switched off, Kys felt her telekinetic powers ebb away, felt even the essential vibrancy of her mind stifled. It was almost intolerable, like being blindfolded and muzzled. She wondered how the inquisitor – a profoundly more powerful psyker than she – could bear it.

Whatever the discomfort, it was useful. With Frauka's cold blankness loosed around them, and with the anti-snoop devices Mathuin had set up, they now enjoyed virtually seamless privacy.

They began to talk. Kys willed them to get it done quickly. She wanted to be rid of Frauka's company, even though she knew his presence was vital if a psyker like Ravenor was going to operate without detection on Eustis Majoris. Untouchables had first been utilised by Ravenor's mentor, the

legendary Eisenhower, who had built up a cadre of them known as the Distaff. Those times were as long gone as Eisenhower himself, the Distaff disbanded, but Ravenor carried on some of his old master's traditions.

One by one, they reported their activities. Nayl briefly spoke of the gang maven he'd hunted in the overfloat, and of her bizarre fate. Kara described the way serious clan muscle had cornered her when she probed too hard after the dealer Lumble. Then Kys recounted the unfortunate matter of Umberto Sonsal.

'I got a lead on his supplier,' she said. 'Drase Bazarof. A line chief at Engine Imperial. I have a residence address.'

'What a mess,' muttered Frauka, with amusement in his voice. He was lurking in the corner of the room, leaning against the wall and lighting a fresh lho-stick from the smouldering paper filter of the one before. Nayl and Kys both shot him dirty looks.

'Just my thoughts,' he said, with a shrug.

'I see no reason to reproach my agents,' Ravenor said. 'The circumstances they each encountered could not have been predicted,' Kys knew there was resentment behind the comment. Prediction was a mind-skill that Ravenor had long tried to master, without success. It was pursuit of that secret that had made him tolerate the eldar for so long. 'I myself have faced the unexpected tonight. A psyker, level gamma, perhaps higher.'

There was a murmur. Ravenor's own latent ability hovered somewhere between high delta and low gamma, an extremely potent capacity that he was able to boost to truly scary levels using the psi-amplifiers laced into his chair.

'I aim to discover who he is, and what his status is. He appeared to be operating as an agent of some kind of private Magistratum unit, but the psykana register shows no one licensed to operate anywhere on Eustis Majoris except at the Guild Astropathicus.'

'Unlicensed... or secret,' Thonius said.

‘I have not discounted the possibility that he is the agent of a rival inquisitor in Petropolis, Carl. I’d like you to spend the next few days finding out what you can about him. His name is Kinsley. He was accompanied by a minder called Ahenobarb and a third man, unnamed. I’ll burn likenesses of all three into your short-term memory later.’

Thonius nodded.

‘Immediately, we need decent transport and secure accommodation. Harlon, Kara, that’s your job. We’ll follow up on your avenues of investigation later. For now, I believe our most promising line lies with Patience’s clue. This man Bazarof.’

ONCE NAYL AND Swole had gone, Ravenor turned his attention to Zael. The child was clearly terrified – of the people he had fallen in with, of the events he had been dragged through in the last several hours.

‘In Genevieve X’s house,’ Ravenor said, ‘you could hear me. Yet you weren’t boosted like Harlon.’

‘I don’t know what that means,’ Zael said. He was visibly shaking, and trying not to look at the strange, sealed machine that hovered before him.

Ravenor had Frauka re-engage his limiter for a short while, and switched his chair’s voxsponder off, speaking directly into the boy’s mind. It seemed to calm the boy considerably but now, relaxing, he became washed out with exhaustion and near to collapse. Ravenor let him curl up on the ratty seat cushions of an old armchair and sleep.

Thonius went through his pockets. ‘What’s this now?’ he said, producing the red-tissue parcel.

KARA SWOLE WOKE, and found herself crooked up in a foetal position on a shabby settee. She yawned, tasted her own wretched morning breath, and then hesitated. In the dimly lit room, Wystan Frauka sat opposite her on another settee. He was smoking, and looking at her. All she could really see was the amber coal of his lho-stick.

She sat up fast, and pulled on her waistcoat. ‘You’re a creepy little ninker, aren’t you?’ she murmured. ‘See anything you like?’

Frauka opened his eyes – or rather, Kara realised that until then his eyes had been closed.

‘Sorry, what?’ he said, taking a drag of his lho-stick.

‘You were looking at me. While I slept.’

‘No,’ he said, with little conviction. ‘I came in here for a rest. I didn’t mean to disturb you. I was asleep.’

‘Right. With a lit smoke in your hand.’

He tilted his head to look at the lho-stick between his fingers.

‘Ah. That’s a bad habit, I know.’

‘Ninker,’ she said, and got up. She scooped her shoulder rig from its resting place on the top of a cloth bale and pushed her way out through the hanging drape that served as a door. Frauka made no move to follow her. His eyes were closed again.

Outside the store closet, it was noisy and bright. The large factory space had a rockcrete floor across which pale daylight shafted down through skylights. Heaps of cloth bales and material rollers twice as high as Kara almost filled the place. She could hear the rattle of the thread machines coming from the adjoining hall, and the whine of the burn-alarms out on the street. Up in the rafters, by the opaque skylights, a few wild sheen birds roosted.

Thonius had told her all about the sheen birds. *Machine birds*. Centuries before, the original architects of Petropolis had commissioned them from the Guild Mechanicus – simulacra of bird life, programmed to flock and sweep around the city spires as an adjunct of the architecture. Time and pollution had dwindled their numbers just as they had eroded the face of the towers. Now few remained: feral, uncared for, unloved.

Like so many things in this city, Kara thought.

Patience Kys was leaning against a wall nearby, eating some kind of meat off a spit-stick. She didn’t look like she’d slept at all.

‘What’s up, Kar?’ she asked.

‘Frauka,’ Kara replied.

‘That frigging slime.’

‘He was watching me sleep.’

‘Frigging slime.’

Kara walked past her into the main factory hall. It had been the best she and Nayl had been able to manage the night before. A clothing manufactory in the busy garment district of Formal D. Decent vehicle access, basic amenities, an owner who was as afraid of crossing the Inquisition as he was glad to get some extra income for letting out the back store.

The boy Zael was fast asleep on a pile of insulation padding. He kicked gently in his slumber, like a dog. Nearby, Mathuin was working under the propped hood of the eight-wheeled cargo they’d bought for next to nothing from a drunken stevedore. Mathuin emerged, wiping his greasy hands.

‘Piece of shit,’ he said, but not to her. Mathuin seldom directed any comment at anybody. Kara liked him, even with his stand-offishness. Studly build, achingly gorgeous dark skin. She particularly liked the way his hair was bead-plaited right across his scalp away from a left side parting. She liked asymmetry.

‘Can I help?’ she asked.

He looked at her as if he’d never seen her before. ‘Know anything about carbide engines?’ he asked.

‘No, I believe I don’t.’

‘Then no.’

Kara grinned, helped herself to his polysty cup of caffeine and wandered on. Sex on a stick, that Zeph Mathuin. A way with the lay-dees.

‘What’cha doing?’ she asked Thonius as she strolled up behind him. He was sitting on an off-cut roll of lining cloth, poring over something, and jumped when he heard her.

‘Nothing.’

‘Doesn’t look like nothing.’

‘I’m making notes. Detailing the case,’ he said huffily, showing her his chapbook.

‘What’s that you’re hiding in it?’ she teased.

‘My pen,’ he replied, revealing it.

‘Right,’ she said. He was really bristling. What had he done to get all guilty about? ‘I was just asking.’

‘Well,’ said Thonius, ‘well, just don’t.’

What the hell was up with everyone this morning?

Kara finished Mathuin’s caffeine and tossed the cup aside. To her left was a bay area screened off by a half-height wall of chalky rockcrete. A rattling frame of pipes and shower roses hung over it, spitting out water. It was a wash area, built for fabric workers to shower in after long shifts in the dye-house. Kara leaned her arms on the half-wall and looked over. She smiled to herself.

Nayl was standing naked under one of the shower-heads, water streaming off his hard, scarred body. He looked as if he was in a trance.

‘Looking good, bounty,’ she called, mockingly.

He looked up to see her, but made no attempt to cover himself. They’d been soldiers together in this war for a long time. Gender distinctions and sexuality had long since reduced to a dense layer of loyalty and unspoken devotion. They had been together for a while, since the early days, when they answered to Eisenhorn. It had been fun. Now, they were like brother and sister.

‘Missed a bit,’ she said.

He looked round.

‘That looks like blood,’ she added.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Mine. Me and Zeph went knocking for that Bazarof chump this morning, early. We’d have taken you too, but you were out for the count and the boss said you needed sleep.’

‘Boss wasn’t wrong. How’d it go?’

‘Shitty,’ Nayl replied, scrubbing the last of the dried blood off his calf with a shred of wet cloth. ‘He’d got wind of Sonsal and done a runner. Left a homemade pin bomb in his lodgings for those who came knocking. I was too slow.’

‘You intact?’

‘Just about. Tap.’

She reached in over the half-wall and knocked the rusty faucet shut. The water pipes shuddered and stopped their output. Nayl splashed through the draining water to the wall and grabbed a dank towel.

‘Got a lead, then?’ she asked, as he dried himself.

‘His workmates said he has family up in Stairtown. They think he might have run home to hide. We’re going to try some addresses there this morning. You up for it?’

‘Sure,’ she said.

Nayl walked out of the shower bay past her, and reached for his bodyglove.

‘Where’s the boss?’ Kara asked.

Nayl jerked a thumb.

She hadn’t seen him, but there he was. A lightless armoured shell lurking between cloth-roll piles at the far end of the warehouse. He’d even killed his anti-grav. The force chair sat on its runners.

‘What’s he doing?’ Kara asked.

+I’m thinking.+

‘He’s thinking,’ said Nayl.

‘Yeah, got that, thanks.’

THEY ROCKED UP north in the cargo-8 once Mathuin had got it running. Nayl drove, with Kara beside him. Mathuin sat silently in the cabin behind them, his heavy kitbag at his side on the tatty rear seats.

On the broad, inter-formal routes the going was excellent. These were great raised roadways of crumbling rockcrete with siding baffles of

chaincage and ballast-filled plastek hoppers. They slid through the grimy morning traffic, adding a billow-wake to the greasy exhaust pall. Kara watched the huge hive-city glide by the window. Stacks, manufactories, broken lots jailed in chain-link, a transit station with an elevated track-section that ran along the inter-route for six kilometres, retaining ouslite walls daubed with illegible slogans and peeling posters, smokestacks, the low, pale sun strobing through the posts of a long roadside fence like a zoetrope.

Occasionally, through the smog, the looming forms of the distant inner-formal towers emerged, like primeval leviathans rising briefly to the surface light. Sunlight struck hard, starry glints off faraway fliers. Dry lightning twinkled over the estuary.

Off the inter-routes, in the tight surface streets of the formal boroughs, progress was a slack crawl. Traffic was dense, and the constantly shifting daily street-marts impeded their way. Kara saw the ratty frontages of shops and trade-dens roll past; dangling neon signs and wrought iron script placards, flocks of pedestrians, faith-paper booths, hollow-eyed indents queuing at the labour halls, peddlers with their barrows, and spry kerb-dancers tumbling for coins.

She heard music from a dozen sources, the booming unintelligible sermons from the street corner speaker-horns, the rise-and-fall whoop of a Magistratum siren. She smelled spit-fat, sausage and skilleted bushmeat from the gutterside cook-stalls. She watched the gampers flood out of the sink-shops every time the burn-alarms sounded. As they unfurled their umbrellas, it looked like a time-lapse reel of forest mushrooms blooming.

‘Eyes up,’ said Nayl. ‘We’re nearly there.’

Ahead of them, the city rose abruptly, as if it had been folded at right angles. The stratum of stack floors and landings climbed away into the murk.

Stairtown.



FOUR

HERE, PETROPOLIS MET the hills and conquered them. Here, the city shelved up and became a vertical borough. Mist had gathered in the deep wells of the formal, and the rain-alarms were ringing. Vast spiral stairways of iron, lidded with tintglas so they looked like vast models of genetic double helixes, rose out of the vapour into the upper levels. Powerful pendant lamps hung down on rusting chains three kilometres long, like shackled stars.

They left the cargo-8 in a pay garage under the west nine stack and climbed spiral five into the habs. All the pedestrian screw-stairs were bustling with citizens, moving up, moving down. Their combined voices filled the huge misty well like the rustle of gigantic paper sheets. The spirals were stepped streets, broad enough for twenty people to a tread. Hawkers and cook-stands had set themselves up on parts of the wider outside curves. Some vendors hung their wares out over the guardrails on long frames so that ascending citizens could admire them from floors below. Gymnasts and acrobats, some of them enhanced with poor quality mechanical augmetics, twisted, rotated and swung from scaffold structures suspended off the sides of the staircase, defying the fathomless drop. Kara pulled on Nayl's sleeve so she could watch them for a moment. Mathuin waited, glowering with impatience, two steps up, the kitbag slung over his shoulder.

That had been her life before this, spinning and dancing between the thorny iron bars of the circus arena. She admired the techniques. Taut wire, trip trapeze, solid bar work. The augmetics were cheats though. Three-sixty differential wrists and auto-lock digits made some of the moves too easy, too safe. She could have done it all, aug-free. She peered over the rail into the ghastly void of the sink below.

Maybe not with that risk.

‘Coming?’ said Nayl.

They went up past two more level stages and, with Mathuin leading, they turned left onto a landing, passing under a corroded sign that read ‘hab west nine eighteen’.

A makeshift trader grotto had clustered itself around the landing stage exit off the stairwell, the way worm-feeders gather around an ocean-floor black smoker. The grotto thrived on passing trade. It offered contraband, tariff-free lho-sticks by the carton, reheated pasties of mechanically recovered meat product, low-quality erotica slates, dubious mech-ware, knock-off copies of small calibre urdeshi weapons, cheap clothing, promise-bonds.

‘No thanks,’ Kara said to a grubby trader who offered her a new ident and a facial re-sculpt for the price of three courses with wine at a Formal B trattoria.

They entered the stack warrens. Rows of hallways, rows of identical doors, rows lined with failing strip-lighting that looked like luminous vertebrae. Trash littered the hallways. There was a strong smell of stale urine.

Mathuin walked ahead, pausing to read off a plak-board notice listing the addresses of the residents.

‘Bazarof, eleven ninety,’ he said.

‘A sister, we think,’ Nayl said.

The hallway carpet had been worn back to the matting by the constant foot traffic. Many of the wall panels had crumbled or been damaged, and most repairs had made use of cheap blue insulation tape, which gave off a sickening smell of rotten citrus. The doors to some habs stood open and inside they glimpsed squalor. Hunched hab-wives talking in doorways or just standing, arms folded, looking out blankly into the corridor; dirty children running from hab to hab; the sound of poorly-tuned vox broadcasts, the smells of rancid food, decomposition, grain liquor, toilets.

Eyes followed the trio indirectly but no one approached them. They didn't want the trouble... they were too tired to deal with trouble. But by now someone would have tipped off whichever clan operated this hab.

Eleven ninety. The door was open. An ugly, unwashed reek emanated from the hab. The walls just inside the door were shelved, and those shelves laden with bric-a-brac that was so dirty and broken it was impossible to identify individual items. Nayl led the way.

The interior was semi-derelict. Exposed bunches of electrical trunking bulged like a goiter into the room where the plasterboards of the west wall had collapsed. Garbage covered the floor and the crippled furniture. Two heavy tanks of lead glass with iron frames stood over by the eastern wall, full of filthy brown fluid that bubbled occasionally. The smell came from them. The only real illumination came from an old pict-viewer set in the corner, distorted black and white images dancing and flickering on its cracked valve screen. A woman sat watching it.

Nayl cleared his throat.

The woman glanced round, and looked them up and down. Then she went back to her viewing. She was old, Kara thought. Not a sister, a mother. A grandmother, even.

'Looking for your brother,' Nayl said.

'Take your pick,' she said, and gestured to the tanks. Kara looked again and saw that inside the glass tanks were pallid, deformed lumps of flesh. Limbless, formless, supported by the filterpipes and the chem-pumps. She saw a single, pitiful eye.

'Shit!' she recoiled.

'Your other brother,' Nayl said.

The woman got up and faced them. If she was the sister, life had ridden her hard and worn her out.

'Drase,' Nayl said. 'It's probably not to your advantage to protect him.'

'I won't protect him,' she said, somewhat surprisingly. 'Knuck-head. He come here earlier, but I sent him away. Way he was acting told me

whatever was after him was going to kill him, and anyone what helped him. And I didn't want part of that. Not for me, or my brothers.'

Mathuin suddenly tensed and turned round. A heavy set, acid-marked clanster stood in the doorway, looking in at them. Four or five more loomed outside in the hall.

Mathuin reached for his weapon, but Nayl stopped him with a look.

'You all right, Nenny Bazarof?' asked the clanster.

'Yes,' she said.

'You don't want them escorting out?'

'No,' she said. 'Drase was always bad news. I won't be sucked down with him. I got my brothers to look after.'

'What happened to them?' Nayl asked.

'Metal poisoning. Industrial accident. They got workers comp, but it's not much. Ten years I cared for them. Can't even afford to flush their tanks as often as I'd like. Drase never gave me nothing.'

She looked at the hammer in the doorway and shook her head. He backed out and left them alone. Then she looked at Nayl, and thought for a moment as if summoning up a great measure of courage.

'Hundred crowns,' she said.

'What?'

'For a hundred, I'll tell you where he is.'

Kara looked away. A hundred was paltry, pocket change. Not to the Bazarof sister, though. More than she'd see in a year. She had to pluck up the bravery just to suggest such an extortionate sum.

Nayl reached into his jacket and counted out a hundred from a fold of local currency. The woman's eyes fixed on the fingers and the money. There was a flash – pain or anger – as she realised she could have asked for much more.

'Drase has a friend,' she said as she took the money. 'Lives up Stair, in the deadlofts, last I heard. West twenty, I think.'

'I'd like you to be sure,' said Nayl.

‘West twenty,’ she confirmed. ‘Right up there. His name’s Odysse Bergossian. They’ve known each other since growing up. Neither one good for the other.’

‘What’s this Bergossian do?’ asked Kara.

The Bazarof woman looked at her, as if only now aware of her. ‘Little as possible. He’s a waster. Got a serious glad-stone habit, last I saw him. Sometimes does a spot gamping, other times odd labour jobs. I heard Drase talk about Odysse working at a meat packers in a freight zone up in K, and sometimes in the circus silos.’

‘Which circus?’

‘The big one. The Carnivora, in Formal G.’

‘Thanks,’ Nayl told her. ‘We won’t be back.’ Nayl nodded, and Kara and Mathuin followed him out of the hab and left the woman to her flickering picter and atrophied kin.

THE VOX-SET BLEEPED. Frauka was reaching for it, but Kys pushed past him to get it first. Even just brushing against him made her flesh crawl. Frauka stood back with a false, laconic ‘after you’ gesture.

‘Kys.’

She heard Nayl’s voice through the tinny burble of the encryption circuits. The channel was as safe as they could make it.

He told her their progress. Ravenor, who had heard the vox-chime, slid his chair over. She knew he was tense. With the unidentified psyker out there, they couldn’t risk switching Frauka off so the inquisitor could shadow the team mentally. Circumstances like this were a cruel reminder to Ravenor how helpless he really was.

‘They’re going up Stair,’ she relayed. ‘They think they’ve got a trace on my guy.’

‘Tell them to be wary, and to check in regularly,’ Ravenor’s chair-speakers whispered tonelessly.

Kys talked to Nayl some more, and wrote down the details of their destination. Then she hung up the vox-horn.

‘Got a feeling in my bones,’ she said. ‘They’re going to need help.’

‘Wystan, could you prep some weapons for us?’ Ravenor asked. The chair rotated slightly to face Kys. ‘Patience, I think the factory owner has some vehicles. Go and see if we can borrow or rent one from him.’

As Frauka knelt down and unclasped one of their equipment cases, Kys strode away across the factory hall.

She was tense too, and edgy. A sound from above made her start, but it was just the mangy birds up in the skylight, knocking their rotting wings against the glass.

She saw the boy, Zael. He was awake, crouching against a rusted loom-block, sipping dehyd soup from a plastek bowl. They’d offered him proper rations, even foods from one of the street stands, but it seemed he liked dehyd. He was a sickly little thing. His undergrown body was so strung out by self-inflicted abuse, he probably couldn’t take anything more than dilute, freeze-dry broth.

He was watching Thonius. The interrogator had set up his portable cogitator set, and spliced the data-leads into one of the municipal communication conduits. A branch of them ran down the alley beside the hall, and Thonius had used a sniffer to find their voltage and a uni-plug on the end of an extension lead to hack in. The risk of detection was minimal. The whole of the hive was wired up, and given the city’s state of decay there were breaks in the system all over the place. Finding his splice would be like identifying one hole in a fishing net.

And Thonius was a fine operator. He had a slew of whisper programmes and encryption tools, some of them ordo issue, some of them self-written. Through his spliced link, he was rifling the data-blocks of Petropolis for information.

The portable cogitator, leather-bound, was the size and shape of a passenger trunk and so heavy only Nayl could carry it any distance without help. Thonius had got it up onto a pair of packing crates and it now formed a makeshift knee-hole desk. Skeins of wires ran out the back to the junction point with the extension feed. Three more wires ran up into the

sockets behind his right ear. The lid of the trunk, which formed the screen, was propped open with a little brass elbow joint. Thonius was typing slowly using the oiled mechanical keyboard.

‘How’s it going?’ she asked as she came up.

He shrugged. An amber rune appeared amongst the screen’s rolling data columns, and he tutted, pressing a key.

‘Slow. As might be expected of an administry world, the info-systems are vast and well governed. I have to watch every step for fear of detection as an unauthorised user.’

Another amber rune. Another sigh and a tap.

‘See? The city datacores are divided into discrete sub-blocks, which means separate encryption protocols and user codes. I’ve already burned out one decrypter. I’ve had to rescribe the Geiman-rys paradigms from memory.’

‘The stuff you know, Look, we may roll soon, to back up Nayl. You staying here?’

‘Yes, there’s a lot to do.’

She nodded and walked away. Zael was now watching them both, she noticed.

Zael put down his bowl as she walked away. He’d heard most of their exchange and wondered why the foppish man had lied to the woman.

Until she’d walked over, he hadn’t been working on the cogitator at all.

THEY WERE HIGH up at the top of west twenty. They could hear the wind moaning, and the actual fabric of the massive tower creak and give. The rotting hallways were deserted. It was creepy, like being on an abandoned ship at sea.

This was the upper realm of the Stairtown towers, a place called the deadlofts, six kilometres above sea level. Originally, these levels had been luxury habs and penthouse apartments, but then Stairtown – like so many other boroughs – had fallen into slump. Without maintenance, the summit levels had succumbed to decay. Wind, acid rain, regular fires generated by

lightning strikes, vandalism. The rich and beautiful people had moved out years ago. Now the deadlofts – the top six or seven floors of every Stairtown stack – were lawless places where the homeless, the poor, the fugitive and the insane claimed their own spaces. And even they did not number many.

It was a sparse and inhospitable zone. There were no amenities. No power, no plumbing. Some areas were entirely exposed to the lethal ministry of the rain. Others had lost their tintglas and were traps for murderous radiation and ultra-violet light. Where the window ports were broken, the high-alt gales could get strong enough to rip people right out of the tower or rupture them with extremes of atmospheric pressure.

It had taken the three of them two hours to cross between the Stairtown towers on foot to west twenty, and another whole hour to climb to the loft level. No working lifts. Two double-backs because of blocked accessways, two more due to screwstairs that had collapsed from corrosion.

They saw only a smattering of life. Ragged vagrants huddled in corners; shadows that darted away as they approached: a naked man clad only in faithpaper, his body hideously blotched with acid burns, cooking moss over a candle; a semi-dismantled cleaning servitor, dead except for its left function limb that mindlessly circled a buffing mop in the air.

They had to sidestep acid drips from the roof, and check the flooring where it had been eaten into soft pulp. Draughts whined down abandoned halls. Nayl had drawn his pistol and the other two followed him closely. Kara was especially unnerved by the absence of Ravenor. She had to remind herself that back in the old days, with Eisenhorn, she'd happily functioned without a telepathic nursemaid. But she'd become so used to Ravenor's presence since then.

They'd questioned a few of the inhabitants. Some refused to answer at all, and most that did claimed not to know any Odysse Bergossian. But one old woman, hunched on a mat in an empty hab, had mumbled a few directions. The windows behind her were cracked and broken, and hard light and cold

air streamed in. The back of her head and neck were burned raw. She hadn't moved for a long time. She was eating beetles when they found her.

Through those cracked windows, Kara saw the poisoned glare of the sky, the cloudbanks, the dropping view through the tower tops towards the vast expanse of the smog-covered city. This was the brightest, lightest place in the whole of Petropolis, pushed up out above the pollution cover. And it was also the most wretched.

They followed the instructions she'd lisped through bad teeth flecked with broken wing cases and leg segments. Two halls on, they heard music.

Kara drew her compact and checked the load. Mathuin put down his kitbag and unfastened it. He pulled the rotator cannon out and settled its bulk over his left shoulder, buckling the support frame around his torso. The weapon was about as long as a man's arm, a counter-weighted cluster of ammunition hoppers from which a swathe of six aluminium barrels projected. The cannon actually depended from a gyro-balanced armature that extended from the harness frame under his left armpit. Mathuin took off his left glove and revealed the polished chrome augmetic connector that replaced his left hand. He clunked the connector into the receiving socket on the back of the cannon so that it became an extension of his arm, and brought it to life. The autoloading mechanism clacked and shifted the first of the ammo hoppers into place. The swathe of barrels test-rotated as one with a metallic whir.

'I'd like to be able to talk to him before you paint the walls with his body,' Nayl said.

'Just a precaution,' Mathuin said.

'In that case, you get to be backstop.' Nayl made to walk on, then turned back. 'You kill me or Kara with that bullet hose, Zeph, and we'll come back to haunt you to the end of your frigging days.'

'I know what I'm doing, Nayl,' Mathuin said. He did. Kara knew that. He really did. In this trio, despite her years of experience, she was the amateur. She'd learned her trade since recruitment as an ordo auxiliary.

These two had both been doing it since they could walk. Bounty men, hunter-killers, so hard-bitten teeth broke on them.

But when Nayl offered her point, she felt flattered, even now. Stealth was her thing. She moved like silk, and had a nose for surveillance. Those skills had been why Eisenhorn had chosen her for his retinue in the first place.

She led the way, Nayl a dozen metres behind her, Mathuin out of sight down the hall. Sunlight blazed down through the skylights, mobile and distorted by the fast motion of passing clouds. She could smell acid.

The music was louder now. Thumping, tinny. It sounded like bootleg pound, the music of the twists. Mutant club sounds were all the rage with younger types.

At the end of the hallway, a door was shrouded with opaque plastek sheeting stapled to the jamb. Hard daylight shone out around it. That was where the music was coming from. She thumbed off the safety and edged forward. Handwritten in paint by the doorway were the words GET OUT.

Ordinarily, she'd have had Ravenor tell her what was behind the sheeting. Now she had to sidle close and peer through a slit. A large penthouse chamber, part of a suite. Bare floorboards, bare flakboard walls, huge tintglas windows through which the sunlight blazed.

Kara waved Nayl flat against the wall, and took a breath. Then she pushed through a gap in the plastek sheeting, her weapon raised, and panned it left and right.

There was no one there. A stained mattress roll, some empty wine bottles, drifts of discarded, soiled clothing, a battered old four-speaker tile player covered in club stickers from which the music was raging. There were open doorways to the right and the left.

Beside the mattress roll was a polysty tray full of glad-stones. The Bazarof woman had said Bergossian had a habit. The smooth stones, mined on a distant outworld and strictly prohibited, were slightly psyk-reactive. Held in the hand or put under the tongue, they produced a warm,

blissful sensation. The sense of euphoria and well-being could last days apparently. They were popular in the twist clubs down in the undersink.

These, strangely, were dusty, as if unused and untouched for weeks.

The floor around the bedroll was covered in screwed up hunks of red tissue paper.

Nayl came in after her, his heavy pistol up and ready. She pointed to the player to suggest she might turn it off, and he shook his head. He kept watch on the right hand doorway as she checked the left. A galley kitchen, unlit. It stank. With the power and water cut, it had no function any more except as a dump for trash. Heaps of discard rubbish and crap rotted in there. Craproaches scurried in the gloom.

She re-emerged and moved towards the window to be out of line-of-sight from the other door. With Nayl covering her, she went through.

Another large room, also well lit thanks to the vast expanse of tintglas. This one was also empty. There was a broken toilet stall to the left, and another doorway in the right-hand wall. Originally, this had been where the apartment finished. The doorway had been opened through the flakboard partition with a sledgehammer, allowing access to the neighbouring apartment. More plastek sheeting covered it.

Kara waved Nayl in. Immediately, he saw what she'd seen. Someone had used a charcoal or graphite stick to write on the bare walls, the ceiling and the floor. The markings seemed insane. Some were patterns and geometric designs, dividing up the sections of the room. These were annotated by odd, scrawling texts, some of which were written directly onto the walls, others on sheets of paper taped to them. There were drawings too: men, cherubs, monsters, all primitive but carefully rendered.

'Ninth heaven of truth...' Nayl whispered, tracing a finger along one annotated space.

'The place of atonement. The zone of understanding. The fifteenth heaven, where men rest from their travails...' Kara looked at him. 'What the frig is this?'

He shook his head, and pushed his way – gun raised – through the plastek-covered doorway.

ODYSSE BERGOSSIAN HAD taken over nineteen apartments in the top of the deadlofts. All of them were stripped and almost scrubbed clean and all linked by holes he'd smashed in the dividing walls. Each one was an annotated diagram of insanity. The markings and writings became more and more complex as they edged their way on. Increasingly, the creator of the markings had used colour – wax crayons – to decorate the walls and ceilings and floors. They found discarded lump ends of crayons underfoot, and more scraps of red tissue.

By the tenth apartment, the designs had become manic, and extraordinary. Fully rendered views of the city in full colour, as good as any limner could have managed. Lifelike faces. Unearthly beings that made Kara's skin goose to look at. Intricate captions rendered in gold leaf and paint, naming such things as the 'Hall of Sublime Healing', the 'Domain of the Sane', the 'Fifty-First Heaven of Lesser Gods' and 'Somewhere New'. Some of the murals had blood and body fluids caked into them. Kara and Nayl were both on their nerve ends. The music, far behind them, was a distant pulse. They could hear the creaking of the high-alt wind.

In the nineteenth apartment, they found Odysse Bergossian.

He was naked and hunched up, drawing on a wall. A basket full of broken crayons, paint pots and mucky brushes lay beside him. He had half-covered the room with designs. The contrast between the decorated half and the bare walls was oddly distressing.

He didn't look up as they came in. They only knew it was Bergossian because he jumped when Nayl said his name.

He looked at them. He was young, no more than twenty-five, and his face and neck had nasty burns on them. He covered his face with paint-smudged hands and rolled over in a heap.

'Where's Drase Bazarof?' Nayl said.

Bergossian moaned and shook his head.

‘Harlon!’ Kara called. Nayl went over to her, keeping his eye on the trembling man.

She pointed at the wall, and Nayl looked. This was the drawing Bergossian had been halfway through when they interrupted him. In full colour, beautifully captured, was the likeness of Bergossian. Standing over him, half-finished but unmistakable, were the figures of Kara Swole and Harlon Nayl.

‘Emperor preserve me!’ Nayl whispered.

ZEPH MATHUIN DECIDED he had waited long enough. He was about to move when he heard footsteps coming up the hall behind him. Silent, he backed into the shadow of a doorway.

A thickset young man in labourer’s clothes walked past him, carrying a pail of hot riceballs and meat sticks, and three polysty caffeines on a preformed tray. He disappeared in through the plastek drapes.

Mathuin keyed his voxer.

‘Nayl. I think Bazarof is coming your way. Want me to intercept?’

‘Follow but hold back. We’ll get him.’

‘ODYSSE? ODYSSE? I’VE got lunch,’ the young man called as he walked through the connected, decorated chambers. ‘Odysse? Where are you?’

‘Busy,’ said Nayl, stepping out of a doorway and aiming his weapon.

The young man gasped and yelped, and dropped the foodpail and the drinks.

Kara appeared behind Nayl, dragging the whimpering Bergossian by the wrist.

‘Drase Bazarof?’ Nayl asked, lowering his gun. The young man clearly saw this as a chance to flee, and turned. Mathuin stood behind him, rotator cannon aimed at his chest.

‘Uh uh uh...’ Mathuin hissed.

‘I’m not Bazarof!’ the young man implored, looking back at Nayl. ‘I’m not! My name is Gerg Lunt.’

‘And that makes you what?’ Nayl asked.

‘A friend! Odysse’s friend! Shit, I knew Bazarof would get us into trouble...’

‘He’s here?’ Nayl asked.

‘Three cups of caffeine,’ Mathuin noted.

Lunt looked twitchy.

‘Up,’ said Kara suddenly. She’d heard the creaking of the roof before any of them.

Mathuin swept his weapon up to aim at the ceiling.

‘No!’ Nayl cried. ‘I want him alive.’ He looked at the skylight. ‘Boost me, Kara,’ he said.

‘You’re kidding, right?’ she answered. ‘You boost me.’

Nayl was about to argue.

‘Wasting time!’ Mathuin growled and placed himself under the skylight with his free hand cupped. ‘Move it and do what you do,’ he said to Kara.

She used Mathuin’s cupped hand as a stirrup for one foot, and his shoulder as a shelf for the other. He was rock steady. Nayl glared at him.

There was no clasp or catch – the light had not been designed to open – but the seals were rotten and Kara pushed it out of the frame with the heel of her hand. Then she hoisted herself up and through from Mathuin’s shoulder.

Nayl looked at Mathuin a moment longer. ‘Guard them,’ he said, pointing at the two men, then hurried from the room.

OUTSIDE, IT WAS biting cold and painfully bright. The air was thin. Kara edged her way along the roof, testing every step. Years of acid rain had turned the fabric of the roof into a damp, flaking landscape.

She put on her glare-shades and pulled up her hood. The gables and wings of the roof section projected before her. Behind her was a tower of old comm-masts and cable-stays, a vertical nest of rusting metal and faded

plastics. She looked around. There was no sign of anyone. Maybe it had just been the wind.

The world was huge. She could see for many kilometres in every direction: an immense raft of curdled black cloud cover out of which the massive towerheads of Stairtown poked like islands. The sky above the cloud layer was a bright, watery smear. She didn't want to be out here for long, especially if the rain or wind picked up. She could already feel the skin of her face tingling. She fastened the neck of her hood up to her nose.

She walked along further, getting nearer to the edge. It was treacherous underfoot. Kara held onto a stay-cable for support and saw smoke waft out where her glove clasped the dripping steel. Fumes from acid reaction was also puffing out from under her feet.

Over the steady buffeting of the wind, she heard a noise, turned, and almost slipped. Then she realised it was her vox-link. 'What?'

Nayl's voice sounded like it was coming up from a deep drain, '-are you?'

'On the frigging roof!' she answered.

'No... where on roof?'

She looked around, trying to translate the stark roofscape into something he would understand from beneath. It wasn't easy.

'Just turn on your locator!' he snapped.

Stupid. Obvious. The precariousness of her state had made her forget basics. She was light-headed. The thin air was making her pant. Kara pulled back the cuff of her jacket and activated the little tracer sewn into the lining.

'Got me?'

In the deadlofts below, Nayl came out of Bergossian's rooms into the hall. There was a rune flashing on the fold-out screen of his compact auspex. 'Yeah,' he called back. 'I'm almost under you.'

She moved on. The wind was gusting stronger and it smelled wet and corrosive. There was a flapping, rattling sound, but it turned out to be a series of tatty old mills along the edge of the roof, their vanes spinning as the air moved.

Thirty metres away to the west, a gaggle of sheen birds burst up into the air, wings beating, and curled away over the lip of the eaves. They'd been disturbed. Kara saw a figure scrambling along the lower slope of the next roof section, clinging on to a tension cable.

Arms out for balance, she paced down the pitch of the roof like it was a high wire, and then leapt down onto the flat top of a ducting box. The bare metal of the box's top dented like a tin drum under her weight and splashed up moisture from the pool gathered there. She saw a smatter of burn-holes appear in the strengthened cloth of her leggings.

He'd heard her land. She saw him look her way, and then continue on with more animation.

Ninker was going to slip, if he wasn't careful...

'Bazarof!' she yelled. It was hard to project her voice over the thump of the wind.

He vanished out of sight behind a flue stack. She dropped down off the ducting box and scurried over the coping of the lower wing. Almost at once, she slipped over and began to slither down the hip of the roof. She caught a projecting truss-cable and arrested her slide.

'Kara?'

'West of me! About forty metres!'

In the corridor below, Nayl broke into a run, calculating her guess on the auspex screen. He had to kick open a door that had been locked for decades and pick his way through a dark, stinking apartment withered by the encroachment of the rain. Through another door, ajar and decayed to the consistency of wet paper, and he was out into a service corridor. It was littered with rusting junk and as dark as the room before it. A derelict servitor, decomposed down to bone and bare metal, decorated the next junction. It was lying on the bonded floor as if prostrate in prayer. Nayl turned left, groping now; it was so dark. Slimy tendrils of filth dangled from the ceiling and got in his face. He spat and wiped them away. There was another door. It gave beneath his shoulder.

Sunlight, bright and dangerous, streamed down through broken skylights into another corridor. The floor had almost rotted and burned away. He had to step his way on the exposed cross members. Below his feet, gnawed holes showed the drop into the darkness of the floors below.

Nayl paused, legs braced wide between two mouldering joists, and raised his pistol to cover the skylights. The wind was creaking the superstructure, but it sounded like someone was up there.

Kara followed her quarry's path along the lower roof, using the tension cable as he had done. By the time she reached the flue stack, her gloves were ruined. She could feel spot-burns on her legs from the splashed rainwater. She was out of breath and dizzy.

The metal flues, like the pipes of an organ, had been burned almost blue by the climate. She swung around them. The end gable of the roof wing was immediately beneath her, then the gulf itself: the flank of the tower dropped away into the cloud cover below. It looked a long way, even to the clouds. Much less to the ground itself.

There was no sign of Bazarof. Had he slipped and fallen? If he'd managed to scramble around the gable-end – using only the rotting fascia as a foothold – he might have made it onto the adjoining roofwing – a wide mansard that abutted the central rise of the tower. Beyond that was a flat roof section fitted with broken skylights.

Kara chose her grip and spidered her way around the gable. Mushy pieces of verge boarding came off in her fingers. She leapt the last of the distance onto the edge of the mansard, trying to ignore the prospect of the drop behind her, and ran up it on all fours to the crest. There, she slithered down onto the flat section. Her heart was pounding, and her breaths came in rasps.

Gun drawn, she reached the skylights and peered down. Nayl and the barrel of his gun were looking up at her.

‘Damn!’ she panted. ‘Didn’t he come that way?’

‘No sign here.’

She looked round. 'I'd have seen him if he'd doubled back. Maybe he did fall off...'

'What?'

'Just stay there,' she said, and circled back away from the skylights. Debris and junk fallen from the inner tower littered the inward part of the flat roof. She picked through it. The pieces of flaking metal siding, that were bent and collapsed like fallen window blinds, were large enough to conceal a man. In fact, they concealed nothing except pools of slime water and rot.

The rising elevation of the inner tower was smooth travertine, streaked with orange stains of corrosion. As she got closer, she realised the stains marked out where iron rungs had been set into the wall. They were loose and unsteady, but they supported her weight. She went up with her gun tucked in her belt.

The end of one of the rungs popped out in a puff of floury mortar. She skipped it, stretched, and pulled herself up onto the next few. The extra exertion made her head swim.

'Kara?'

Nayl ached to know what was going on. With his feet braced wide between the joists, there was no way he could launch himself up far enough to get out of the roof lights.

'Kara!'

There was a ledge, ten metres up, underbraced by eroded arcature. She got up onto it. It was only a metre wide and ran along the face of the tower to the corner. At the head of the rungs, lichen had been scratched and torn away recently: she wasn't the first to make this climb.

She went along the ledge to the corner. The turn of the central tower looked out over another jumble of roofs. Bazarof was scrambling over them, into the face of the gale.

'Got him! South-west! The next wing!' she voxed and jumped off the ledge. It was a five-metre drop, down onto a flat section of coping that ran

along between the beehives of six air-exchangers. Bazarof was still going. He hadn't heard her.

She ran down the coping, stepping wide over iron roof ribs, and jumped down again. She was coming up the slope of roof behind him. Stay-cables swung loose from stanchion brackets and the wind moaned through the few strands that remained under tension. He looked back and saw her, then darted left sharply along the line of the roof, his feet slipping on the loose tiles.

'Stay put!' she yelled. He reached another cluster of air-exchanger domes and disappeared from view.

She drew her weapon again, and edged between the first of the metal beehive casings. She winced as a squall of rain spattered down out of the pale sky, then she advanced a few metres more, around the next two domes. Another flurry of rain. This time she turned her head aside and raised an arm to shield her face.

He hit her from behind, slamming into her hard and banging her sideways into the nearest dome. She dropped her shoulders and flinched in time to evade his follow-up punch. His fist cracked hard against the dome's metal.

Bazarof squealed with pain. She brought her gun up, but he lashed out blindly and chopped her across the inside of her elbow. At the same moment her right foot came out from under her on the wet leading. She fell back against the dome again, and he kicked her hard in the belly. She was coughing, spitting, cursing, so winded she couldn't move. Bazarof – bigger and tougher than he'd seemed from a distance across the roofscape – reached down and tore the compact from her hand. He moved to aim it at her head, but had to fiddle with the unfamiliar design. She rolled hard, sweeping his legs away with a desperate scissor kick.

He crashed over heavily, the gun skidding away down the guttering. They rose together, Kara extending an open palm in time to stop his first punch dead and a forearm in time to block his second. Bazarof had physical strength, but no combat training, except maybe a diploma in basic brawling. His third strike was a hooking punch that she stepped back out

of, turning her back step into a full rotate that delivered a backward spin-kick to his chest. He was thrown back against another of the domes, but came back for more, his eyes bright with fear. She pivoted back on her right foot and, straight-legged, brought her left heel down into his shoulder. The blow broke something and folded him into a heap.

She reached over to grab him, but wobbled badly. The effort of subduing him had really made her head spin, and she had idiot stars of nausea dancing across her vision.

He put an elbow into the side of her left knee and Kara folded, hitting her head a glancing blow against the side of the air-exchanger as he went down.

A blur. Colour. Shapes. The smell of blood in her sinuses and the taste of it in her throat. She shook herself. Bazarof was gone.

As she was getting to her feet, she heard a sharp cry above the wind.

‘Bazarof? Bazarof?’

He had tried to flee, but the thin air and effort had made him dizzy too. He’d slipped on the edge of the coping and gone over the side, sliding down the hip of a steep catslide roof almost to the edge.

Kara peered over and saw him. A terrified white face looked up at her. His hands were wrapped around a rain-spout. His feet were milling in empty air, the sheer drop of Stairtown below him.

She couldn’t reach him. She leaned out and tried, but knew at once that she was likely to slide right down after him. She looked around and found a broken length of pipe, but it was too short. He squealed again, his hands slipping, acid fumes rising from between his fingers.

Kara ran back along the coping and grabbed one of the slack stay cables. It was heavy and awkward, and coiled against her grip like it was alive. Grunting with effort, she dragged it back to the edge and spilled it out down the catslide. It writhed open and down, flopping over the gutter near to him with a weighty metal snap. Then she worked it along so it was right beside him. The cable squeaked along the guttering.

‘Grab it! Come on!’

He moaned that he couldn't.

'Come on!' Kara was damned if they were going to lose another source before he could be questioned. Their record during the Petropolis op so far was dismal.

'Grab it!'

With a frantic lunge, Bazarof grabbed the cable. He started to slide again almost at once. Kara cried out with the effort of bracing against the cable.

With a shriek, Bazarof went over the edge.

Kara cursed aloud, but the cable was still dragging heavy. He hadn't fallen. He was still holding onto the steel line, dangling out of sight. She heaved once, twice, her teeth gritted, her straining hands slipping on the wet cable. He was too heavy. She couldn't – Patience Kys appeared beside her.

'Where did you come from?' Kara gasped.

'We thought you might need a hand.'

'Help me, for frig's sake, before he falls!'

Kys didn't move to take hold of the cable. She just looked down the catslide towards the gutter, her brows furrowing.

Kara felt a sudden slack on the line, as if Bazarof's weight had gone. Ninker had fallen after all...

But no. He slid into view, hands first, then his face, then his body. He was still gripping the cable, but it was Kys's telekinesis that was dragging him up. Face down, the whimpering man slithered up the tiled slope like a snail, until he was close enough for them both to grab and pull onto the coping. Kys stood back, exhaling softly from the effort. Bazarof writhed and moaned at their feet.

'Enough!' Kara told him, dragging him to his feet. He was shamming. He clawed at her, so she rammed his head against the side of an air dome with enough force to dent the dome's casing.

'Enough!'

And at last it was.

SUSPENSORS GENTLY HUMMING, the inquisitor moved through the chambers of Bergossian's deadloft at a slow, frictionless glide, scrutinising the intricately marked walls one centimetre at a time.

Frauka walked beside him, smoking another lho-stick. They looked like sedate visitors at a public gallery.

'Important?' Frauka asked.

Ravenor's chair-speakers responded with a soft, non-vocal click, the equivalent of a pensive human 'hmm'. The chair swivelled round and the sensors regarded the opposite wall. From deep inside the chair-body came the faint whirr of recording pict-ware.

'Acts of insanity,' Ravenor said at last. 'Random scrawls, showing signs of tertiary stage derangement, yet sub-ordered with specific or quasi-specific symbolism. The product of a trance-state, I think. An altered state, certainly. No way to tell if there's any consistency to the inscriptions. The maker could be mad, or illuminated beyond the remit of sanity.'

'Surely not,' Frauka said. The voxsponder's cadences were created only by the generative combinations of artificial speech. There was no inflection to the rise and fall tones, so it was impossible to tell when the inquisitor was joking.

'I'm joking,' Ravenor said. 'Probably.'

Nayl walked into the room behind them. 'They've got him,' he reported. 'Just dragged him back.'

'Then let's talk to them. Wystan, if you please?'

Frauka stubbed out his smoke and activated his limiter.

THEY WOULD NOT need much breaking. I could tell that as I rolled into the room where Mathuin had them under guard. Their surface thoughts were all but shouting out. Bazarof was dazed and terrified, and Lunt was scared and at a loss to know what was going on. Odysse Bergossian was a mess of tics and withdrawal spasms.

They were frightened enough by the armed members of my team, but the sight of me chilled them into silence. My chair has that effect, I know.

Faceless, armoured, cold, as unforthcoming as a polished stone block.

At first, I didn't even have to ask questions. Lunt's mind was the most open. He was a friend of Bergossian's, and sometimes – like now – stayed with him in the deadlofts when work was thin and he didn't have the cash for flop-house rates. He was a labourer, poorly schooled, but intelligent enough. Bazarof, known to Lunt but not considered a friend, had shown up that morning desperate for a hiding place. He had refused to elaborate, but Lunt thought it likely the authorities were after him.

Lunt had advised Bergossian not to take him in. Bazarof was not good news. The pair had found trouble together before. More importantly, Bergossian was in no fit state. For years now, he'd slithered from one addiction to the next, spending great swathes of time out of his head. It had been obscura for a long while, then pills, then gladstones.

In the last few months, Bergossian had been using flects too. A few at first, relying on gladstones for his base fix, but then more and more. Bergossian had really lost it. He'd forgotten about gladstones, and used flects every day. That's when the drawing had started.

Lunt was worried about his friend. Lunt was no user – a little lho, sure, sometimes a puff of obscura, but nothing hardcore. He wanted his friend clean. Bergossian wasn't taking care of himself. He wasn't eating properly and he certainly wasn't working enough. Strange thing was that he seemed happy. Blissful, most of the time, muttering with delighted but barely comprehensible enthusiasm about the designs he was making.

He'd become so obsessed with them; he'd knocked through room after room with a sledgehammer to open up more space to work in.

I drifted out of Lunt's mind. Bazarof was tougher-edged, even though his head was still throbbing from the crack Kara had given it. He'd heard about Sonsal, and was running witless.

+You're right to be scared.+

Bazarof's head snapped up and he stared at me, blinking.

+Everything you tell me now will encourage me to press for leniency in your case. Where do the flects come from?+

I knew he wasn't going to tell me, not just like that. Under verbal interrogation, he'd spin lies for hours until there was nowhere left to go. But the moment I asked him, the answer he didn't want to give came right to the forefront of his mind as he concentrated on not letting it slip.

Bazarof was no user either. A line chief at Engine Imperial, he pulled a decent enough wage, but supplemented it with black market dealings, usually narcotics. He couldn't afford to use. The guild mechanicus kept a tight watch on their franchised workforce, with random urine sampling and blood tests. If he used, he'd lose his job. Likewise, if he dealt at work. But he did a nice little off-book business in his home stack.

As a line chief, he knew people, and had plenty of contacts in supplier manufactories and haulage consortiums throughout the city. He had good travel papers too, which gave him the luxury of free movement. Most of all, he had a lot of old friends like Odysse Bergossian who lived and earned in the shadows of the hive's economy.

Bergossian had been Bazarof's line of supply for three years, on and off. He could get most things, mainly because he craved them himself. What he got depended on where he was working. Yellodes and gladstones when he packed meat in K, grinweed when he gamped the sink markets, though he hadn't done that for a while.

The good stuff, like the flects, came from his links at the circus.

I switched my attention away from Bazarof, and directed my thoughts towards Odysse Bergossian. His mind was like rubber.

+Odysse. Tell me about the circus.+

Bergossian blinked and laughed out loud, looking around like a child for the source of the voice. Lunt and Bazarof both looked at him in alarm.

There was no tricking Bergossian's mind into the truth the way I had done with Bazarof. There was no guilt or secrecy to trigger, no hidden truths to tease out. His thoughts were a miasma of unfocused light and colour.

I probed a little deeper. I felt Kys start as she sensed the tingle of increasing psyk in the room. A little pattern of frost flowers bloomed along the window.

I went deeper still. Uncomfortable, Kys walked out into the hall. Blunt as they were, Kara, Mathuin and Nayl could feel it too now, their wraithbone markers glowing slightly. They stood back warily. Bazarof and Lunt trembled and tried to distance themselves from Bergossian. He was sitting in the middle of the floor, chuckling to himself. They pulled away towards the kitchen doorway. Behind me, feeling none of it, Frauka lit another lho-stick and started to hum a tune.

+Odysse.+

Another laugh, but it was followed by a slight wobble of the lower lip. I extended into his surface consciousness, surprised by the manifold waves of bliss and contentment I found there. His mind was a warm soup, a thick, reassuring, fluid space.

+The circus, Odysse. Tell me about that.+

‘The circus, the circus, the circus!’ he giggled. This made everyone jump. It was the first thing anyone had said since I had entered the room.

+Yes, Odysse. The circus. That’s where you get the flects, isn’t it?+

‘Yes, yes. On reflection, yes!’ he gurgled and started to laugh hard at his own awful joke. He rolled over on the floor and pawed at the air.

+Who sells them to you, Odysse?+

Bergossian snorted. ‘Duboe!’ he cackled. ‘On reflection, Duboe at the cavae!’

‘For frig’s sake, Odysse!’ Bazarof shouted. ‘They’ll frigging kill you if you sell them out!’

+Shut up, Bazarof.+

‘Duboe! Duboe and the game agents!’

‘Don’t, Odysse!’ Bazarof yelled again, moving forward. I had no time for that. I kicked out a little psi-slap that slammed Bazarof off his feet and back into the kitchen wall.

Then I rolled forward until the giggling Bergossian was right in front of me.

+That’s very helpful, Odysse. What else can you tell me?+

He started to shake his head, as if he was tiring, like a man who has been on a wild circus ride which had been fun at the time but had left him feeling sick. Like a drunk who has drunk too much. I could feel the bitter tang of his nausea rising, the wild disorientation of a mind and body spinning out of control.

May the Emperor forgive me, it was delicious. Any extremes of physical experience, even the most unpleasant, are so alien to me that I cherish them.

But this was getting worse. It was as if the blissful, warm fluid of his thoughts was draining away. Shapes rose out of the liquid like submerged rocks exposed by the tide. The warm light in his head dimmed and a black dawn rose up around the rim of his mind.

+Odysse.+

The shapes were around me now, twisted, calcified, bone-brown, slick with the last of the warm fluid as it splattered and gurgled away. On the floor in front of me, Bergossian was starting to have some sort of seizure.

From behind, I heard Nayl hiss. ‘Get out of him. Boss, get the hell out of him!’

I realised... that I could not. I was sliding forward into the black-light landscape of his blighted, burned-out mind. For a moment, it seemed almost comical to me: as if I was perched, not in my suspensor module, but in an old-style, non-powered wheelchair, which had been set on a slope and I was rolling, rolling down, gaining speed, rushing headlong, without hands or feet or brake to stop me.

+Odysse. Let me go.+

Bergossian was thrashing around, cracking his head, heels and elbows against the floor. There was a screaming, but I could no longer tell if it was his physical vocalisation or some keening threnody surging across the scorched earth of his thoughtscape.

I plunged on, unable to stop. Before me, a vast wasteland of jet cinders and blackened material, twisted, bulbous, shattered, crusted. The sky was domed and full of rushing, splintered cloud. A sun, as red as a blood-shot

eye, rose and climbed across the flitting heavens and set again in the space of a single breath.

The howling increased. The black landscape cracked open into a stinking abyss. A pit of skulls. Billions of human skulls, every single one tainted by the echo of its own death-scream. There were buildings before me, towers and spires and cyclopean citadels, all ruined, all made of solidified night. A burned city. A murdered hive. Was this Petropolis? Was this the future?

I fell between the vast towers, and saw their countless windows, row upon row, tier upon tier, deadlights like eye sockets, giving back no reflection, stained by unimaginable ages spent in consuming darkness.

Then I was stationary. The howling had stopped. I was alone in the silence, the ruins rising around me, the air heavy with ash and decay. There was broken glass underfoot and—

Underfoot.

Underfoot.

I started to shake. I was standing. I was whole. Feet, legs, torso, arms, fingers...

I looked down, and saw with eyes instead of photoreceptors. The crazed black soil under my naked feet was covered in a myriad shards of broken glass. Imperfectly, like a deranged mosaic, they reflected back my perfection.

I saw my face. The face I had once had. Gideon Ravenor, young, strong, determined. How I had missed that face...

Something was coming. I could hear it behind me. Something heavy, something fast, skittering and crunching the glass underfoot. Snorting. Growling. Spitting.

I wanted to turn. My remade body refused to move. In the broken reflection at my feet, I saw the hulking, hairy shadow of some great thing loom up behind my shoulder. Teeth flashed.

In the last second, the numberless glass fragments showed my reflection change and become true again. My true self. A knotted, bulging sack of

scar-tissue and old burn-smears, the stumps of limbs, the ragged useless lump of a head, healed up and pink-smooth like a badly-sewn bag.

And entirely helpless in the grip of Chaos.



FIVE

YOU COULD HEAR the circus from twenty streets away and see it from ten. The horns, the sirens, the deafening come-ons from tannoys, the dancing light beams and the popping flares. It lit the city night of Formal G like a bowl of fire.

The approach streets and ramps were packed: jostling multitudes, laughing and drinking, and the peddlers, tricksters, hawkers and smile-girls who fed off them. It was a game night.

The circus drome was a colossal domed amphitheatre, its tiered and arcuated outer walls towering ninety metres high. But the great ouslite substance of it was just a shadow in the smoky night, lost behind the flash and dazzle of the raging lightshow. Red stablights on the tops of the walls crisscrossed the exuberant crowd. Screamer rockets banged up from the upper arches and fizzled into showers of green and white sparks. Twenty metres above the street on the main facade hung a massive wiron sign that flashed out the name CARNIVORA in letters three times the height of a man. The orange light tubes blinked out the word whole, then pulsed it in syllables – CAR-NI-VOR-A – before blazing out the whole again. Caged fires and glowglobes lit up the stadium's exterior columns, and blue-white electric discharge danced up and down cathode filaments over the horseshoe arches of the public turnstiles.

Factory-grade hooters sounded above the roar of the crowd, and speakers blasted out the bass-beat hook of a popular pound number at inhuman decibels. In time to the music beat, even louder, the vox-horns played a recording of a male voice bellowing 'CAR-CAR-CAR-NIVORA!'

Above the wiron sign, pulsing in time to it, and the beat, and the voice, a massive pict screen projected a loop of fast-edit images. There was a split

second of a naked woman, body-painted gold, turning an aerial cartwheel, that smash-cut to a fragment of two armoured male fighters clashing chainswords. The screen smash-cut again to a violent half-second of some lidless, yellow-toothed saurian lunging at the camera, followed by a final smash-cut to a bloody, blurry decapitation that segued to white noise/pict-out as if the camera had broken. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! CAR-CAR-CARNIVORA! CAR-CAR-CAR-NIVORA! Over and over and over until the assaulting repetition was one numbing adrenal rush.

Patience Kys let the crowd crush sweep her along to public gate IV. She was gnawing on a meat-stick she'd bought from a ramp vendor, and openly drinking from a liquor flask. She laughed and joked and flirted with the moody hammers and indentureds in the crowd around her, posing with some, and gently dissuading the over-eager advances of others with subtle tweaks of telekinesis. In her tight black and emerald bodice and long net-lace skirts, and with her hair loose, she was just another smile-girl out to shout herself hoarse and drink herself blind at circus night.

Already, she was in with a group, a bunch of tanked-up clansters from the meat-pack sept. They were big men, noisy, filthy, their vat-muscled bodies rippling with studs and piercings and the distinctive acid-tats of their clan. One of them – Lesche – kept passing her his grain-liquor for a swig, and he insisted on paying for her at the turnstile. He thought he was in. His brothers certainly believed Lesche had pulled a high-formal party-girl who was slumming it in the sinks of G for the night.

The hammer's hands were all over her, and she let him, up to a point. They flocked en masse through the gate, pressing forward past the stadium stewards towards the wooden stalls in the attic levels. The cheap seats.

There was a weapons check at the entrance to the attic levels. The stewards let the hammers through anyway – they knew better than to question the drunken, rowdy clansters with that many piercings. But the doorway flashed red as Kys went through. The stewards closed on her, despite the protesting roars from Lesche's group.

‘I got no blades,’ Kys said, straight-faced. ‘Shush, you,’ she added to Lesche with a wicked grin. She raised her arms high as the stewards aimed hand-scanners at her body, deliberately accentuating the corseting of her top, her pinched waist and elevated bosom. ‘See? It’s just the wiring in my bodice.’

The hammers roared approval. Realising they were on to nothing, the stewards waved her on. She laughed as she ran through, and Lesche grabbed her around the waist. She kissed him as they rambled up into the attic stalls and found a row with a good view over the primary stage.

The circus was filling up. Searchlights swept back and forth across the terraces, illuminating a raving mass of the populace. The pre-game show was just getting under way. The main arena filled the bottom of the stadium’s bowl. It was an oval measuring fifty by ninety metres, and it was surrounded on all sides by the rising terraces of public seating. It was not a single showground, but resembled rather the oblate cylinder of a revolver: there were six, circular cavities around the edge of the oval arena, and one large one in the middle. Massive hydraulic systems deep underground could raise or lower performance stages – logeums – into place in any of the cavities. The central one was for the night’s headline fight. Right now three of the outer logeums were hissing up into place, venting steam through their exhaust outlets. On two of them, twenty paired teams of knife fighters with silver fish-head helmets were putting on a display of speed bladework with hair’s-breadth accuracy. The crowd gasped. Knives in each hand, whirling like windmill vanes. Sparks sliding off meeting blades. Not a single scratch.

On the third outer stage, four twist clowns were pantomime fighting with mallets. They were all big, lumbering mutants, hunch-backed and ogrish, their disfigurements accented by white face-paint, rouged mouths and striped pantaloons. The audience loved them. The whole arena rotated so that everyone could get a decent view of the outer stages.

The out-stage displays continued as more siren fanfares sounded. A huge scaffold cage descended over the main logeum, winched down from the

massive lighting gantries and over-stage platforms above the arena. The acrobats dropped down into the cage space, like coins into a collecting box, freefalling for heart-stopping distances before grabbing crossbeams and trapeze struts. They were all female, naked, painted gold. A mighty applause rang out across the stadium as they swung, caught, pulled full-ins and struellis, walked over flat bars, spun on wires, somersaulting and flipping. There was no net. The hard arena was thirty metres below the bottom spars of the performance cage.

Lesche slavered at the sight of the nubile gymnasts. He took a tug on his bottle and looked round to pass it to the girl.

But Kys had vanished.

CAR-CAR-CARNIVORA! CAR-CAR-CARNIVORA!

‘YOU! YOU’RE LATE!’ Mamsel Scissors squalled. Her voice was high-pitched and imperious, as befitted the circus’s troupe-mistress. She pulled up the hem of her long lace skirts and petticoats and stomped across the suspended boarding with her walking cane. It was twilight up here, under the stadium roof and amongst the lighting gantries. The swell of the crowd’s roar came up from seventy metres beneath. Gantrymen ran back and forth, hauling tension wires and adding sand-sack counterweights to the pulley systems. Reflected light speared back up through the board cracks in the staging under their feet.

Kara Swole, wearing a flesh-tight bodyglove so transparent she might as well have been nude, was smearing the last squeeze of a tube of gold dye over herself.

‘I’m sorry, mamsel,’ she said.

‘Sorry doesn’t bring in the punters! Sorry doesn’t put on a show!’

‘I know, mamsel.’

Scissors peered at her, her ancient lined face taugt and inquisitive.

‘Do I know you?’

‘Yes, mam. I’m Kara, mam. You hired me last week.’

‘Last week? I don’t remember...’

‘You did, mam.’

‘I doubt it. You’re not right. Too short. Too much bust and hips.’ Scissors poked a gnarled finger into the giving softness of Kara’s left breast.

‘But you did, mam. You thought my handspring and diamond combo was particularly fine, and you liked my wire work.’

Mamsel Scissors stepped back, her withered hands folded over the knob of her cane. ‘Show me the move again.’

Kara breathed in, and lunged into a handspring that she flicked out of, spun a body-length fly-away in the air and came down stuck. The gantry boarding shuddered under the impact and swung very slightly.

Below, the crowd roared again, but not at her. They were out of sight up here.

‘Good,’ muttered Mamsel Scissors. ‘Where did you learn that?’

‘The Imperial pits, Bonaventure,’ said Kara.

‘I still don’t remember hiring you,’ Scissors went on, ‘and you’re late for the pre-show anyway. I won’t have that from my girls. You’re sacked.’

Kara shrugged. She’d got this far into the circus by passing as one of the acrobat troupe. It was enough. Frankly, she’d got herself up onto the gantry late deliberately. She hadn’t fancied risking her neck in the over-hung cage. Once, maybe, she could talk and pass as a dance-crobat, but perhaps, these days, the exertions of the lissom girls spinning below was a bit beyond her.

Still in the part, she frowned. ‘Sacked?’

The mamsel thumped her cane on the boarding. ‘Sacked! You heard me! Get dressed and get out!’

Kara walked over to where she’d left her belongings and gathered up her clothes.

‘Go home!’ Mamsel Scissors screeched.

Kara picked up her kitbag, palmed the compact auto-gun into her left hand, and headed for the ladders.

She was in now. That's all that mattered. CAR-CAR-CARNIVORA! CAR-CAR-CARNIVORA! came the roar from below.

HARLON NAYL LEANED on the horn of the freight-rig as he edged it down the concrete slip towards the service ramp. The crowd parted slowly to let his ten-wheeler through. Every few seconds, the crossing stabs of the searchlights blinded him and lit up the drive-cab blood red.

He adjusted his microbead. 'Coming up on it now,' he whispered. 'This better go good.'

'Relax, Harlon. Piece of piss,' Carl Thonius crackled back.

The shutter ahead was locked down. Stadium officials headed towards him up the ramp, pointing flashlights. They had to push their way through huddles of ecclesiarchy puritans protesting against the barbarity of the circus.

'Now, Thonius...'

Nayl wound his cab window down as the stewards waved at him.

'What's this?' yelled one.

'Meat track for the spoliarium, sir!'

'Yeah? What outfit?'

'Buckanold's Bushmeats, sir...'

'Let's see the slate,' the steward said, holding up a hand.

Nayl handed out the data-slate. 'Thonius...' he hissed into the bead.

'SCANNING NOW,' CARL Thonius said, sitting back from his cogitator. 'Five points, three points, one point... we're up. I'm reading the guy's slate coding now... decoding... decoding...'

'Hurry the frig up!' Nayl's voice rasped.

'Got it. Code's clean. Feeding it through to your slate.'

'SOMETHING WRONG?' NAYL asked, peering out of the cab.

'No,' said the steward. 'No, nothing. A slight registration delay.' He handed the slate back to Nayl. 'You check out. Go through, bay number

fifteen. Open the gate, vehicle coming!’

The shutter clanked up into the arch. Nayl gunned the engine and rolled the freight-rig down into the stadium’s choragium. He could feel the thumping handclap and bellowing of the audience above his head.

‘Too close, Carl. Too close,’ Nayl whispered.

‘WAS IT TOO close?’ Ravenor asked.

In the back of the cargo-8, Thonius glanced round nervously from the cogitator at his master. Space was cramped. Between the cogitator set-up and Ravenor’s stowed force-chair there was barely room for the interrogator to sit. Frauka and Zael were exiled up front in the dingy cab. The boy was looking back at them through the chipped clearplex divider. Thonius decided he didn’t like the boy. His eyes seemed to be everywhere. Thonius didn’t like that at all.

‘Was it too close?’ Ravenor asked again.

‘No, no,’ smiled Thonius. ‘This is non-wired hacking. I had to wait until Nayl’s slate was close to the steward’s so I could get clean reception.’

‘And he’s in?’

‘They’re all in, sir,’ Thonius said. He looked at the sleek casing of Ravenor’s force-chair.

‘You’re wondering if I’m all right, aren’t you?’ Ravenor said.

Thonius jumped. ‘I thought Frauka was switched on!’ he declared. ‘How could you read me like—’

‘Frauka is switched on,’ the inquisitor’s voxsponder said expressionlessly ‘But I have eyes... and can read body language. You keep looking at me, Carl.’

Thonius shrugged. ‘That thing with Bergossian. It wasn’t good.’

‘No, it wasn’t. It hurt. I was unwise, and it scarred me. I’m recovering fine.’

‘But—’

‘But nothing, Carl. I probed an insane mind, and almost got caught in it as it collapsed. But I got out. Three days have passed. I’m healing.’

Thonius shrugged. He hadn’t been there, but Kys had told him how Odysse Bergossian had gone into spasm and then... well, exploded. Messily, she’d said, as if there was any other way. Kys said Ravenor had howled as he struggled free of the collapsing mind. A voxsponder shriek. A sound she’d never forget. Monotone. Anguished.

‘Fine,’ Thonius said. ‘That’s good.’

He paused and adjusted the wavelength setting of the vocaster.

‘Getting signals. Kys is in. Kara too. Nayl is still mobile.’

‘Let’s get on with this,’ Ravenor said.

CAR-CAR-CARNIVORA!

The booming declamation came from above her, shaking the walls. The audience was joining in, stamping their feet and clapping in time. Bam-bam thump! Bam-bam-thump!

Patience hurried along the dim stone passageways under the seating, watching the glow-globes twitch as the walls vibrated. As she ran, she unfastened her skirts and let them fall, revealing the tight black and emerald bodice to be the top part of a bodyglove. Now she could move more freely. She adjusted her microbead headset, and pulled on her gloves.

Someone was coming. She sidestepped into the shadows of an alcove. Two stewards ran past, on urgent business.

Up ahead was the hatch entrance to the choragium. A short but heavy-set twist with horns sprouting from his mottled flesh was watching the hatch. Kys slid back against the wall and crept towards him. She picked out a broken bottle on the floor of the passageway and, with a gentle sigh, caused it to skitter and tinkle away from her, past the twist, and past the hatch.

The mutant heard it and turned. His thick, grey fingers raised the power-maul that had been leaning against the wall next to him, and he bent down, searching for the source of the noise.

As soon as his back was turned, Kys danced forward and slipped away through the hatch, flying down the wide metal stairs into the vast understage chambers of the Carnivora.

THERE WAS NO time to get dressed. Kara dumped her clothes and kit on the landing platform of the ladder-climbs, and continued on down, a gold phantom with a gun in its hand.

The sound coming up at her from the arena below was like a physical force: a beating, deafening solid thing that made the wire-supported ladder-climbs sway. Lights were strobing. She looked down. Thirty metres below her and to her left, the stablights were illuminating the main show stages as the dance-crobats finished their amazing performance and slid down glide-ropes to the central logeum. That stage disk was already beginning to descend into the underfloor, and outer logeums were rising to present the next entertainment: a roped saurian and five drug-numbered twist clowns. She looked away as the biped saurian, maddened by goads and skin-implant agonisers, scored an early point, tearing one of the bemused clowns in two. The crowd, now a quarter of a million strong, bellowed their appreciation. The ladder-climb shook. The whole arena shook. It was a predator-roar, the exultation of a blood-hungry mob.

The ladder-climb wobbled. Gantry men were coming up from below to help the overhead crews winch back the dance cage.

Kara looked left and right, made a quick estimation, and leapt off the landing platform, her weapon gripped between her teeth. She fell five metres and caught one of the guy wires with both hands. The snap made her grunt. She accelerated her pendulum swing and then got her legs up over the wire and slid down it. Quite a show, if the lights had been on her. But she was out in the dark, above the radiance of the lamps.

A few metres from the end of the wire, she let go and dropped into space. She turned a neat cartwheel and smacked down onto the landing of another ladder-climb.

She took the gun out of her mouth and wiped her lips, tasting gold body-paint. The western terrace was ten metres below her, a mass of writhing bodies and waving arms. She unwound a support rope from the landing's bracket and tested it for give. Then she kicked out and swung from the landing across to the roof-spars of the attic tiers. The swing wasn't quite going to do it. She let go and flip-flopped the last few metres, landing on a rafter barely thirty centimetres wide.

Kara teetered on her feet for a moment, arms spread.

Then she ran along the rafter and jumped off, dropping onto a crosswise beam two metres below. When she reached the end of it, she vaulted over a stone divider and landed in a service gallery above the attics.

Two clansters looked round in surprise as she flew in and landed with a slap. They had left their seats for the cool gloom of the upper walk, to share some grin and 'lax out' before the main show.

They could scarcely believe their eyes. A voluptuous girl, painted head-to-foot gold and, as far as they were concerned, butt-naked, had just flown in through the frigging window.

'The circus gets better and better...' mumbled one. They stepped towards her.

Kara was suddenly glad of the cacophony from below.

NAYL ROLLED THE freighter to a halt, expressed the air brakes and pulled on the parking lock. The chamber was like a cavern, dark and damp. Five other trucks were parked beside his. The noise of the circus audience was like remote thunder overhead.

This was the choragium, the understage. For all its size, the circus had more private parts than public ones. Immense cellars and subdecks existed to service the arena. Nayl could hear the hissing clank of the rising and falling logeum platforms as he got out of the cab. The air smelled bad. He could taste the ash-burn of the ustrinum, where they cremated the bodies and waste products from the pit fights.

Nayl walked the length of his freighter and hammered on the backdrop. The tailgate slammed open and Mathuin leapt out. He was carrying a pistol, but Nayl knew the murderous rotator cannon was zipped up in Mathuin's kitbag.

'Put it away,' he said, nodding at the pistol. 'We've a way to go yet, without attracting notice.'

Zeph Mathuin frowned and put the handgun into the pocket of the filthy plastek smock-coat he was wearing. Nayl had one on too... crusted with dirt and dry blood.

They hurried across the chamber, through the bustle of the stewards and crewmen. The floor shook with the transmitted shudder of the crowd. They stood back as three cavae handlers led a muzzled, thrashing ursid through to the stage-gates ready for the next show. Nayl found the chained beast's angry whimpers strangely affecting. He felt sorry for it. Win or lose, it would be bushmeat by dawn.

They crossed a stone pier over a rancid waste-sluice, and passed under a heavy portcullis gate into a warren of understage tunnels. There was activity all around: stage-men shouted for cues, labour muscle wound the chain winches, engineers ran coke carts to stoke the furnaces of the hydraulic engines, and gladiators oiled their bodies in the chrismatories.

They came down another narrow stone corridor into a wide underfloor hall. The spoliarium was to the left, a dank, foetid pit where all the bodies were dumped. Mechanised ploughs swept each descending logeum clean of debris and cadavers, and they ended up in the spoliarium. There, the dead were recycled. Armour and weapons were recovered, and rings and trinkets looted. Human bodies were carted away to the ustrinum for burning. Non-human flesh was sold off by the kilo to buyers from the food markets. Bushmeat was a cheap and ready source for the hive's provisioners. Bear, lizard, twist... it all looked and tasted the same once it was macerated, spiced and roasted on a street-vendor's stick.

A few other meat brokers had arrived before them, and were lounging around, smoking, waiting, under an arch nearby. Nayl wandered across to

the spoliarium overseer and signed his name in exchange for a numbered paper chit. At the end of the show, the overseer would draw the numbers randomly. The winning broker got first pick of the spoils, the second got to choose from what was left and so on. A butcher's lottery. The waiting brokers had buckets and carts, soiled aprons, saws and surgical masks. In their filthy plastek smock coats, Nayl and Mathuin looked the part.

‘Lucky seven,’ said Nayl, walking back to Mathuin and flashing the chit.

‘What now?’ Mathuin asked.

‘Now we lose ourselves in the mix. Hang on.’ He strolled over to the waiting brokers, and nodded a few curt hellos. Mathuin heard him ask them where a man could get a drink while he waited. A couple of the brokers pointed and mumbled.

Nayl rejoined Mathuin. ‘Now they won’t even miss us,’ he said as they fell into step.

The underhall was packed. They had to weave their way through the crowd. A team of chainsword fighters shared a group huddle as they waited to enter the caged walkway onto one of the lowered logeums. Weaponeers trundled carts of swords and pikes over to the traps. A pit-bull cracked his lash across the backs of a chain gang of convict fighters, desperate men hoping to win a state pardon through an arena victory. Rumour had it the lord governor himself was here tonight, enjoying the show from his executive belvedere. That would certainly explain the number of marshals on the prowl. Gold painted dancers ran by, perspiring and swearing. Two trainers were having a stand up row about marquee billing. A professional gladiator, huge, oiled and armoured, knelt and bowed his head as the circus’s appointed priest blessed him in expectation of death. Tipsters and bookies were everywhere, eyeing up form and gathering last minute advice for their clients. Servitors lumbered past with crates of water and ale for the fighter pens. Musician bands tuned up against the constant din. Money changed hands, debts spiralled or were wiped clean, letters of pledge were signed. Medicae surgeons knelt in a pool of blood around a twist clown who had come off stage minus an arm.

Two animal handlers hurried past with long pole-goads. They were heading through the crowds towards a heavy shutter on the far side of the hall.

‘Follow them,’ said Nayl.

THE GALLEY HALLS were rattling with activity. In a hellish, smoky environment, squads of cooks and their underlings and servitors slaved to cater for the paying customers in the stadium. Most of their fare was savouries or pies that were taken up by box lift to the vendor stalls in the stands, but there were sumptuous feasts to be prepared for the dignitaries in the exclusive belvederes – meals that would be shipped up by hand and served by impeccably mannered attendants in circus livery.

Kys held back in the main doorway for a second. Unless she went all the way around the outside underwalks of the circus-drome, the only way to the cavae was through the galleys. And no matter how many telekinesis distractions she created, she’d not manage that without being seen. She breathed in, remembering one of the inquisitor’s training dictums: ‘If you can’t hide, don’t. Bluster.’

If nothing else, Patience Kys had boundless confidence. She adjusted her microbead and whispered, ‘Carl? Who’s head chef tonight?’

As the reply came, she straightened her bodice demurely, adopted a haughty stance, and marched into the kitchens.

A few underchefs glanced at her, perplexed, but they were too fearful of their head cooks to stop what they were doing and challenge her. Kys strode right down the line between brushed-steel workstations, and paused to lift the lid on a large stockpot simmering over a galley range.

‘Who the hell are you?’ yelled a senior cook, spotting her. He was a fat man – always a good sign in a cook, Kys believed – but he was meatily powerful and over two spans tall. His apron was cinched around his great girth. Red faced, he marched over to her, pushing several slow-moving undercooks out of his path.

Kys ignored him. She elegantly extended the index finger of her gloved left hand and stuck the tip of it into the pot's contents. Then she withdrew it, and made a business of studying the moonstone ring she wore on it.

‘I said—’

‘I heard,’ she cut him off, and looked him in the eye. ‘Are you Binders?’

‘What?’

‘Binders, man, Binders. Are you Binders? I was told he was cook in charge tonight.’

The senior backed off a little. ‘No, mam, I’m Cutcheska. Senior Binders is away in the cold store, but I can get him if—’

‘No matter. Cutcheska. Your name was mentioned too. I’ve heard fine things of your work. Fine things.’

The senior blushed. ‘Mam...’

Kys walked past him to another range where underlings were pan-frying marinated terrapins. ‘You understand that not just anything can pass the lord governor’s lips?’

Cutcheska balked. The lord g—’

‘His food must be inspected rigorously for tampering.’

‘I... I know that, mam!’ the senior exclaimed, hurrying after her. ‘But his tasters and personal dietician have already examined the kitchen and—’

‘I know they have. But an unscheduled inspection keeps you on your toes, does it not?’ Kys leaned past an undercooks shoulder and pressed the tip of her left index finger against the tenderised belly of a frying terrapin. Then she studied her ring again. As if noticing the way Senior Cutcheska was staring at her hand, she held it up towards him.

‘Augmetic,’ she said. ‘The index finger is a micro-calibrated poison snooper. If it detects any trace venoms, the result is displayed in the ring screen.’

‘I see,’ nodded Cutcheska.

Kys raised the little finger on her left hand. ‘This digit cases a tight-focus digi-weapon. If I find any food tampering, I am authorised to use it to

incinerate the line chef responsible for the contaminated area.'

Cutcheska started to tremble. 'I can assure you—'

'I'm sure you can. Walk me through.' Kys started off again, with Cutcheska hurrying to catch up. She paused for a moment to glance back at the undercook frying the terrapins. 'Too much nutmeg, by the way.'

Cutcheska took her down the line, waiting nervously while she poked her finger into all kinds of food. He brought her a glass of wine, and she poked her finger into that too, before nodding and knocking it back. He introduced her to four other seniors, who fell in step behind them like an anxious chorus.

Finally, she turned to face Cutcheska. 'Through there,' she said, indicating over her shoulder with a thumb. 'That goes through into the cavae, am I right?'

'Indeed, mam.'

'I'm very troubled. Livestock... including xenos-breeds... penned this close to the main food manufactory.'

'We are scrupulously, clean, mam—' Cutcheska began.

'My dear senior, xenos germs and bacteria travel in ways unknown to science. I will have to examine it.' Kys took off one of her pearl earrings and handed it to Cutcheska. 'Hold that up, please, between finger and thumb. No, arm straight, Higher. That's it.'

She started to walk away.

'What am I doing?' he called.

'That's a relay sensor for my augmetics,' she said. 'I'll enter the cavae and take readings, and then compare them to the delayed response of that module. Be careful, it's very delicate. Arm straight, please. This should only take about ten minutes. You can stand there for ten minutes holding that up in the air, can't you, senior?'

'Of course, mam.'

'Good. Arm really straight, please. Do try not to move.'

THE KNUCKLES ON her right hand were badly skinned. Threads of blood ran down the back of her hand and along the gold-painted skin of her forearm. The second clanster's jaw had been more solid than it looked.

Laying them out had slowed her down. Kara was running now, along the attic upper walk, and then down the stone screw-stair, the emergency exit that led right down the side of the building into the subdecks. She took them three at a time, hip-surfing off the handrails and leaving streaks of gold paint behind. The stadium was still shaking with noise. Through a window-slit, she glimpsed the night's first headline bout beginning on the main logeum. The outer stages had sunk down into their pits, awash with gore and littered with bodies, victorious champions raising their arms and bloodied blades to the baying masses as they descended from view. To a fanfare and a tumult – CAR-CAR-CARNIVORA! Bam-bam-thump! – the evening's first primary spectacle rose up on the central stage. Chained at intervals around the main stage's edges were four professional pit fighters, armed and gleaming, and four inhumanly massive greenskins, glanded out of their minds on spika and slaving at their leashes. A thorn-bar cage rose up to surround the main logeum. Then the chains released.

The crowd roared, louder than ever before.

Kara kept on running.

She came down into a choragium sub-deck where sooty spade workers were shovelling body parts into the furnace hatches of the ustrinum, and sprinted west, through the tunnels of the fighter pens towards the cavae.

A pair of stewards at the entrance tried to stop her.

'Where you off to in a hurry, dancer girl?' asked one.

'Not that we mind you running, at all,' smiled the other. 'Makes your body jiggle real nice, if you know what I mean.'

No time left. Certainly no time for subtlety. 'My frigging boyfriend just got eaten by some frigging carnosaur!' Kara yelled. 'I gotta get in there!'

'If he's eaten...' one of the stewards began.

'He had my nanny's diamond ring as a keepsake! I gotta check the dung for it, or nanny'll kill me!'

There was no arguing with that. They let her pass.

‘Uh, some keepsake,’ one of the stewards called after her.

RANKLIN SESME DUBOE, accredited handlerman-chief of the Imperial pits, ran the cavae. He was two hundred years old, standard, and had benefited from judicious juvenat work. He looked forty-five, was strong and well muscled. His grizzled face sported a bushy salt-and-pepper moustache. He never seemed to have to raise his voice. Just a look sent his handlers scurrying. He was a force of power in the circus understage. Without his say-so and his skill, the show would simply not go on.

He knew what to buy and where to buy it. He knew how to source the most interesting and deadly beasts for the show, and how to cage them and keep them fit, and how to get them dandered up just right for the spectacle.

Of all the great understage sections of the circus stadium, the cavae smelled the worst. Worse than the kitchens, worse than the fight-waste furnaces, worse even than the reeking spoliarium. In a long, semi-circular series of dank chambers under the drome’s western end, the pit animals were caged and prepped. The air was wretched with the sharp bite of piss-ammonia and fecal matter. Blood too. And the humid musky scents of penned creatures, most of them predators, most of them anguished and goaded.

A cue-man ran a slip over to Duboe. He read it, tossed it away, checked with the logeum control via his headset, and then pointed across the paved stone floor to a team of handlers around a trap cage in which a mature fighting strathid was clawing and clacking.

The handlers obeyed at once. They pulled the slot-hatch open on the logeum entry, and then cranked back the cage door. The flightless fighting bird – four metres tall and with a beak the size of an Space Marine’s power axe – came rushing out up the penway, driven by the sparking jolts of the handlers’ electro-goats.

Overhead, the crowd thundered approval.

Pulling off his headset, Duboe walked over to the group of game agents assembled around an upturned pack-crate they were using as a table. A smile-girl in a short skirt had fetched them liquor and grin from upstairs, at Duboe's expense. She was serving them now.

Duboe approached, and shook hands with a few of them, accepting a shot-glass of amasec from the girl.

'Budris... good work, that strathid. Worth the wait, I'm sure.'

Budris, a sallow man with two lean bodyguards, nodded his satisfaction.

'Skoh. What can I say?' Duboe slapped hands with a heavy-set, square-jawed man with sandy-white hair. Skoh's bulky figure was sleeved in leather armour. 'Perfect saurians as always.'

'I may have some long-tusks come winter,' said Skoh. 'Interested?'

'Only if they're the aggressive kind. The dociles play really bad here. Yeah, I'm looking at you, Verdendener. I haven't forgotten that crap-fest last summer.'

A bespectacled agent turned his head, miffed. 'I was assured of their quality—' he began querulously.

'Take another drink, Verdendener,' Duboe smiled. 'You've redeemed yourself with those ursids. Never seen bears so nasty. Leave the long-tusks to Skoh here.'

Skoh nodded appreciatively.

Duboe looked over at another game agent. 'Murfi... stop bringing me shit crocodilians, or I'll turn them back.'

Murfi hung his head. 'Sorry, Duboe. They seemed class to me.'

'They weren't class. They were shit. Doped.'

'I had to dope them to get them in transit.'

'Next time load them with a spike to get them kicking. Those bastards just lay there in the frigging pool, like it was midsummer with nothing to do.'

'Sorry, Duboe.'

Duboe finished his drink and set the glass down. 'That's all for tonight, gentlemen. I've work to do. Pick up your fees from the drome office. I've stamped your dockets. Get on with you.'

The group broke up. Duboe tugged Skoh by the arm and drew him aside.

'Post-match, we'll talk. I've got demand. Can you deal?'

'I'll talk to Captain Thekla,' Skoh said.

CAR-CAR-CARNIVORA!

The main stage slid down out of sight. An outer rim logeum rose with two raptors from Quinze on it, slaving at their chains.

In the underpits of the cavae, Harlon Nayl walked up behind Duboe and fell in step with him. Duboe was busy shouting out at a team of gangers who were about to let a bull-cat out of its cage.

'Duboe?'

'Who are you?'

'Let's take a walk and talk.'

Duboe stopped and looked at Nayl. They were eye to eye. Duboe was a big man and he didn't take shit from anyone.

'I don't think so,' Duboe said.

'And yet... I think so,' said Nayl. 'There's a Tronsvasse 50 in my coat pocket, and it's looking at you.'

Duboe frowned. 'Just a word, and my staff will have you over. Gut you. Feed you to the animals. I don't know who you are, but get out of my frigging way.'

Nayl smiled. 'You want to go for it? Look to your left. Catwalk. See the big guy? He's watching out for me. That's a rotator cannon. Let's see your staff deal with that.'

Duboe shrugged. 'So, you're heavyweight. Hardcore. I'm impressed. What do you want?'

'Cooperation,' said Nayl.

Duboe nodded. 'Look, mate, if I don't release these cygnids, the circus master will have my guts.'

‘Go ahead.’

Duboe aimed a control wand and frothing dog-beasts dashed out of their cage and up the trap towards the stage.

‘You said cooperation,’ Duboe said. ‘Concerning what?’

‘Flects. You deal. I know. I want a source.’

Duboe laughed.

‘Funny?’ asked Nayl.

‘Like I’d tell you. You’d need more than a gun in your pocket to get that out of me.’

‘And there I was being nice,’ smiled Nayl.

‘I’m sure you were,’ Duboe said. He looked back at Nayl. ‘Rip-fish. What do you know about them?’

‘What?’

‘Rip-fish. Are you familiar with them?’

Nayl frowned. ‘They’re from Antigula. Antigula, right? Like eels, but voracious. Strip a human to bones in a second...’

He paused.

‘Why the frig are you asking me that?’

Duboe grinned and raised the control wand. ‘Because you’re the one standing on the trapdoor.’

The hatch parted under him and Harlon Nayl fell.

Below, the water chute was a frothing madness of famished rip-fish, boiling the water to hell.

AMID THE CAVAE’S din and activity, no one seemed to notice what had happened for a moment. But Mathuin had his eyes on Nayl, and started forward along the catwalk with a cry.

Duboe, hurrying on his way, clapped his hands and roared an order. A mob of waiting handlers immediately unlatched a main pen, and herded horned grazers out towards the central up-ramp. They were big, jittering

beasts, designed to be the third party distraction in a large-scale man/predator showfight.

Mathuin cursed. Surging forward, the grazers suddenly created a flowing wall of haunches, bellies and hooves between him and Duboe. He ran along the catwalk further, to where suspended steps gave him access to a higher walkway.

‘Duboe’s running,’ he voxed as he moved. ‘Duboe’s running and Nayl’s down.’

Duboe himself moved quickly across the main floor-space of the handling chamber. He was talking fast into his headset, making it look like business as usual, but in fact he was calling in his inner circle. Already, three or four veteran handlers were heading after Mathuin. Two others were heading across the understage to check the rip-fish had done their job and to close the tank shutters.

The pair of them approached the deck-hatch and heard the wet thrashing from below. One of them went towards the winch-post that manually controlled the hatch.

Upright, a slightly surprised look on his face, and his hands at his sides as if to keep balance, Nayl rose up out of the tank-pit, suspended on empty air. He wasn’t even wet. Duboe’s goons blinked at him. Nayl landed on his feet, gently, on the edge of the tank in front of them.

‘Where did Duboe go?’ he said, as if nothing untoward had happened.

Scared more than anything else, the goons drew out short-bladed estocs and lunged at him. Nayl delivered a backhand slap across the face of one whose headlong charge became a disorientated backward stagger. Then he sidestepped the other. The second man was only wrong-footed for a moment. He turned, to come in at Nayl again.

But he cried out in alarm. Although his feet had stopped moving and he was willing his body around, he was continuing to surge forward. His feet dragged and pumped weightlessly on the pit edge and then he was suspended out over the tank itself, held in space by some soft, invisible force.

A force that went away again as suddenly as it had come.

With a shriek, he dropped out of sight.

The other goon rallied at Nayl, who grabbed his knife-hand, snapped the wrist and punched him so hard in the face that he fell down and didn't get up again.

'Thanks,' Nayl said. 'I thought I was fish-bait there.'

Kys walked into view, breathing hard. 'Sorry it was a bit last minute. You've put on weight.'

Together, they started to run across the chamber. Many of the handlers and pit-crews had seen the brief, violent altercation, and had stopped work, glancing around in confusion. Some were calling out for Duboe.

'To the left. That way,' said Kys, running ahead of Nayl. Pit-men got out of their way in a hurry.

'Mathuin?' Nayl voxed.

'Busy,' the link answered.

Mathuin was up on the higher catwalk by then. Duboe's hefty teamsters, a couple of them twists, were coming up ladders at either end. The bounty hunter slid to a halt, looked up and down the walkway, and then swung the cradle-brace around so the cannon's multi-barrels covered the west end of the walk.

Two men ran up into view. One had a drawn stub pistol.

'Drop it!' he shouted.

'You're kidding, right?' Mathuin replied. He tipped up the barrels with a slight tug and fired off a blurt. The sound of it boomed across the chamber. Hyper-velocity shots howled over the heads of the two men in front of him. The one with the stub pistol fell down the steps in an effort to duck, and knocked the man behind him off the stepway entirely. Falling, the man tried to grab a suspension strut, but missed and landed badly on a cage-roof below. The small, biped saurians in the cage began to leap and snap up at him. The man struggled to balance on the curved roof-bars and yelled out for help.

The sound of Mathuin's cannon had caused other trouble. There was genuine panic in the cavae now. The penned animals began straggling against their cages. Several others in the process of being moved, including a spiger and the grazers Duboe had signalled, went berserk and broke free. The spiger – a three metre long felidform with eight legs and a furred, segmented body – snapped its leads, brought a servitor crashing over and started to chase pit-men across the floor. The grazers stampeded in all directions, crashing into cages, into chute-walls, into guardrails, into crates and barrels, into men. Six of them, in a tight, galloping pack, broke all the way round the saurian lockers and trampled two handlers on the loading ramp behind them. The grazers had big, V-shaped horns growing up from thick bone-masses above their flaring nostrils, and when they ran, they put their heads down. There were marrow-mashing crunches. A body was tossed up into the air, terribly gored, and came down on the locker roofs. It lay there, leaking blood through the bars and driving the caged saurians into a frenzy. More handlers ran in, firing scatter-guns, and cracking lashes. Other workers fled for the exits.

From his vantage point, Mathuin glimpsed Duboe running through the pandemonium towards the northern cargo-docks. He voxed the sighting to the others, then ducked shots at him from behind. Several pit-men, firing small-arms, were rushing along the walkway after him.

Mathuin turned and felt the rotator-cannon shudder against his hip. White flame danced around the muzzles. His pursuers pulverised explosively in puffs of blood and meat and several shots tore into the catwalk itself, shredding the decking and shearing support cables. A whole section of catwalk tore away and plunged twenty metres to the floor below.

Mathuin turned grimly to continue on his way when something of extraordinary force struck him on the left shoulder and wrenched him off his feet. He spun off the walkway and into the air. He blacked out for a microsecond, then woke in time to black out again when he smashed, face first, into a cage roof.

Fifty metres away across the cave's crowded, chaotic floorspace, the game agent, Skoh, lowered his custom-made long-las.

'Thank you,' said Duboe. 'Now come on.'

'This is my neck on the block here too, Duboe. Who are these people?'

Duboe smiled at the game agent, pushing pit-men out of his path. 'They're dead,' he said.

MATHUIN WOKE WITH a start. Before he had even tried to remember where he was, he knew he was hurt bad. Broken ribs, seriously fringed arm and shoulder.

He was face down, suspended across the bars of a cage roof. His head, right leg, right forearm and the business end of the rotator-cannon were all hanging limply down through the iron rungs. He tried to move, but it seemed too painful, and the bars were so widely spaced that if he rolled too far, he might well slip down between them entirely. Slowly, he raised his right hand to clasp the nearest rung, then his right leg, hooking his foot around a rung for support. Then he tried to raise his head. Pain made him close his eyes. Whiplash, maybe, from the fall, combined with the damage the las-load had done punching through his shoulder.

For a second, Mathuin felt hot, damp, stinking air blow up at his face, and wet droplets spatter him. There was a sound like two heavy wooden boards being smacked together.

He opened his eyes.

Four metres below, the cage's occupant, a mature crocodilian, looked up at him with lidless yellow eyes. It lunged vertically again, its great maw wide open and, pain be damned, this time Mathuin pulled his head up. Another hot blast of breath and saliva. Another hollow smack as the jaws closed empty.

The thing slithered round beneath him. He pulsed the trigger of the cannon to rake it to pieces, but got nothing except the pinging misfire tone. The fall had screwed the cannon, jarring the munition feed out of its lock.

The crocodilian powered up again, driving itself against the cage floor with its massive tail. This time it got him. The tip of the massive jaws closed around the dangling end of the cannon barrels.

‘Oh shit...’ Mathuin gasped as the gigantic weight began to pull the cannon down between the bars, and him with it.

FOR A MOMENT, across the heads of the milling crowd, Nayl saw Duboe. Then he was gone again, and trouble was rushing Nayl and Kys from all sides. Pit-men and twists, paid well to be loyal, piled in with fists and blades and goad-staves.

Nayl was in no mood now. With a snarl, he lashed into the first one, crashing a nasal bone, and chopped an elbow elsewhere into a throat. An electroprod stung him a glancing blow on the right hip, but the armour of his bodyglove soaked the worst, so he tore the prod out of the man’s hands and stung him back into the air with it. Then he brought the crackling prod round one-handed like a sabre and felled the next.

‘Patience!’

‘Right with you,’ she said, making her words audible over the commotion by way of a little T-nudge boost. Two pit-men were already on their hands and knees at her feet, coughing blood. She straight-armed the heel of her left hand into the solar plexus of a third, catching the barbed pole the man dropped with a little telekinesis and then spinning the pole straight into the face of another. A twist with a cleaver swung for her, but she did a nimble three-sixty walkover to get out of his way and then TK’ed the floating pole round in a fast circle and cracked the twist around the back of the skull with it.

Kys stepped forward over the twist and drew four kineblades that had been concealed as boning in her bodice. The four sharp slivers began to orbit in slow circuits around her. Nayl tossed aside the now buckled electroprod, and tackled another handler using an arm-lock, and pushed the yowling man out of their way.

Duboe had already disappeared through the shutters into the northern cargo-docks.

RAW AGONY TORE through Mathuin's shoulder and neck. The crocodilian was beginning to shake its snout. He couldn't reach around far enough with his right hand to release the cannon's harness straps. He felt himself beginning to slide. 'Help... me...' he gasped.

'GET OUT OF here,' Duboe told Skoh as they crossed the cargo-dock. Skoh had just used his long-las to cut down a maddened grazer that was bucking and jerking across the deck. 'I've got things to do. Get out and I'll meet you at the usual place.'

Skoh nodded and hastened off towards his truck. Duboe turned and went the other way towards his private offices under the north-end terraces. By then, the whole stadium knew something was amiss in the under-stage. There was a lot of discontented noise from upstairs. A squad of six armoured marshals came pounding out of the stair access to his left. Regularly posted at the circus, the officers recognised Duboe at once.

'In there! The cavae!' Duboe yelled. 'Reckon it's some of those frigging anti-blood sport maniacs. They're armed, so watch it!'

The marshals pumped their shotgun grips and spread out towards the cavae hatchways. Duboe reached his office, punched his code into the door plate, and was felled from behind by a hefty blow.

He looked up, dazed. One of the frigging dance-crobats. She was pointing a compact at his face.

'What the hell...' he growled.

'You're coming with me,' she said. 'Right now. Before this gets any further out of hand.'

Duboe grinned. 'Ekkrote,' he said.

'What?' said Kara.

Ekkrote was one of the Carnivora's headline gladiators, something of a local hero in G. Two and a half spans tall, an ex-clanster, formed like a

mountain range from grafter muscle, he was blessed, oiled, armoured in gold mono-bond ceramite armour, armed with a chainsword, and loyally in the pay of his friend and dealer Ranklin Sesme Duboe.

He was also standing right behind Kara Swole.

NAYL AND KYS came up out of the cavae into the dock, and straight into the path of the Magistratum squad. They saw the heavy pistol in Nayl's hand and aimed their riot-guns and red laser-taggers.

‘Where you are! Drop the handgun!’

Nayl glanced sideways at Kys. She didn't even break stride. The four kineblades zipped away from their orbit around her and flew into the open barrels of the four nearest pump-guns. Two misfired on the spot, blowing their users back hard. A slamming wave of telekinesis and the butt of Nayl's pistol left the rest sprawled and disarmed.

Nayl and Kys broke into a run.

FACED WITH A choice between keeping her gun or keeping her head, Kara opted for the latter, and threw herself into the longest impromptu dive of her life to avoid the gladiator's scything chainsword. She had no time to prep for a decent landing and the compact bounced out of her hand as she sprawled over and rolled.

Ekkrote was also fast. She rolled hard and then had to back-flip just to evade the singing edge of the sword as he stormed after her, swiping at her.

His blade tip cut a groove in the rockcrete floor, then nicked a pillar. Kara ducked and did a handspring sideways, landing neat and next to her fallen compact. She snatched it up and fired off four or five shots. Ekkrote's armour and surface muscle stopped them all. The chainsword mangled the muzzle of the compact and she ditched it, turning a backwards somersault as the gladiator closed the distance between them again.

Kara was out of breath. Her muscles burned. How much longer could she stay out of the bastard's reach?

THERE WAS A shot – something chunky like a las-carbine – and the crocodilian let go and flopped over onto the cage floor, leaking black ichor from its split brain pan.

Mathuin sagged as the weight released. His left arm felt like it had been torn out of its socket. He saw the barrels of the rotator were twisted and deformed.

He peered around, upside down. Carl Thonius was staring up at him from outside the cage, carbine slung in his hands.

‘You alive?’ he called.

Mathuin moaned, nodded and slid slowly back along the roof bars. Then he flopped over until he hit the ground. When he landed, he just stayed there, too hurt and exhausted to move.

Thonius walked up to him. The cavae around them was still in uproar.

‘You’re here,’ panted Mathuin.

‘Yeah. Sounded like you needed the whole works.’

‘So he’s here too?’

‘Oh yeah.’

RUNNING ACROSS THE cargo-dock, Nayl and Kys saw Kara fighting to stay out of the big pit-fighter’s way. Any second now, the chainblade was going to unzip her.

‘Kara!’ Nayl yelled. He was still fifteen metres away. He raised his heavy pistol and opened fire, striking the gladiator’s back armour several times.

Ekkrote lurched under the hi-cal impacts. He wheeled away from Kara, not interested in her any more, and took another bullet in the cheek-guard. He charged Nayl and Kys. Kys met him with her telekinesis, but he was too massive for her to lift. All she could do was stop him in his tracks for a moment. Ekkrote struggled against the invisible barrier and Kys wobbled back a step.

‘God-Emperor!’ she wailed with the effort. ‘Drop him, Nayl!’

‘Trying!’ Nayl replied. He’d slapped home a fresh clip and was busy emptying that. The pit-fighter was clearly hard-wired against pain and hyped up on some serious glanding frenzy-maker. Nayl was inflicting serious tissue damage to the gladiator’s chest, but still he was fighting to reach them, his face a rictus of kill-hate.

‘Can’t hold him!’ Kys barked. Her telekinesis stalled, exhausted, and Ekkrote thundered towards them. Then a huge force lifted the gladiator off his feet and drove him hard against the chamber wall. He continued to thrash. The force, invisible, slammed him into the wall three or four times until the stone facings cracked and he went limp.

The inquisitor’s force chair powered towards them across the dock. Frauka – his limiter clearly active – walked behind it. Zael was in tow.

Nayl pushed on, past Kara, who was on her knees panting, and into the handlerman’s offices. The floor was littered with papers, slates and other belongings that had been overturned in Duboe’s frenzy to cover his tracks.

Duboe was behind the desk, a heavy-grade tube-charge in his hands.

‘Uh uh!’ he warned, his hand ready to twist the arming dial. ‘Back out!’

As if alive, the tube-charge leapt out of his hands and crunched hard into his nose. Duboe fell on the floor, hands clutched to his bloody face. Kys stepped up behind Nayl and took the charge out of the air where it was floating.

Together, they bundled him out onto the dock where Ravenor was waiting with Kara, Frauka and the boy.

+Get him to the transports.+

They all started to move, then stopped when they heard the inquisitor send the word, +Wait!+

His mind-voice seemed to falter.

There was a rush of air. The main dock hatches around the outer edges of the bay were hissing open. Units of Magistratum and PDF troops were streaming in, and amongst them were several men and women dressed in simple grey suits.

Two were already heading right towards them. One was a very big man indeed. The other, small and thin, was regarding them with piercing blue eyes.

It was the psyker, Kinsky.



SIX

‘YOU WANT I SHOULD...?’ Frauka began.

‘Not yet,’ I said. I was ready for Kinsky now, whoever he was. To my team, he was just a scrawny, grinning wretch. To me, he was ablaze from head to toe in lambent psi-flame. His big minder – Ahenobarb – stood ready to catch him the moment he went bodiless.

I didn’t want a mind-fight. I certainly didn’t relish the prospect of going up against this one again. But I would if I had to. And I was on the ground now, face to face. He’d find me more of a match.

+Let us pass.+ I sent.

+(Laugh) I don’t think so. Several of the people with you are armed. I want to know who and what you are.+

+Not without some notion of your authority and jurisdiction+ I sent back flatly.

Kinsky pursed his lips. Marshals were closing in around him, weapons aimed at us. Others spread out through the cargo-dock and through into the choragium proper, rounding up the scattering circus workers. I heard weapons discharge. Some more of the poor, loosed animals brought down, I supposed.

Kinsky reached into a pocket of his grey suit and flipped open a wallet, showing us the official seal.

‘Lomer Kinsky, Ministry of Sub-sector Trade, by the authority of the lord governor himself.’

He used his voice for this, so we all could hear him.

I’d heard of the Ministry, of course. A soft, bland title for a powerful regulatory body. The lord governor’s secret police. Not a force to be trifled

with. Kinsky's presence at Sonsal's house, and the way the marshals had deferred to him and his colleagues, now made sense.

But, as the saying goes, I had one better. The time for subterfuge had gone... or at least, had been stolen from us by circumstances. The nature of my operation on Eustis Majoris was about to change irrevocably.

I sent a mental impulse into the display mechanism of my chair, and a small flap slid open on its armoured prow. A fish-eyed projector lens flipped out, flush to the smooth bodywork, and glowed into life. I displayed the hololithic version of my rosette.

+I am Gideon Ravenor, inquisitor, Ordo Xenos.+

It was worth it just to see the look on Kinsky's face.

THE LORD GOVERNOR'S palace was a bratticed tower rising from the side of the gigantic administry monoliths in Formal A, like a pier of coral from a main reef. Heavy rain lashed through the night as we were escorted in armoured vans to the palace undercroft. We all went: myself, Kara, Nayl, Patience, Frauka and Zael. Duboe was carted off into custody by the Departamento Magistratum. Carl and Mathuin had not yet been rounded up, and I trusted they could stay out of harm's way.

Kinsky, Ahenobarb and a female in grey whose name I wasn't told escorted Frauka and me up to the cap levels of the palace. We left the others waiting in an anteroom off the undercroft.

Kinsky was clearly nervous. His psi-force had ebbed a great deal; it was just a flicker now. I could tell he remembered our clash at Sonsal's house. He'd cut loose there. Now he knew I was an inquisitor, he was worried how things might go for him.

The elevator doors slid open and we emerged into a high hallway lined in wood veneer and beam lighting. At the far end, more doors opened into a wide, softly-lit apartment whose tintglas windows overlooked the entire western part of the hive.

'Wait,' said Kinsky, and the three of them withdrew, leaving me alone with Frauka. Frauka wandered across the room between armchairs and

settees, and opened an inlaid box on the writing desk under the windows. He took out a lho-stick – a more expensive brand than the one he smoked – and lit it.

‘Should I contact the ordo here?’ he asked.

‘We’ll see,’ I said.

A man walked in from a side door. He was dressed, like Kinsky, in soft grey murray, and was slender, with a chin-beard and tied-back black hair. The third man from Sonsal’s house. The one with the power. Not power like the psyker. Real power.

‘Good evening, inquisitor,’ he said, bowing slightly to my chair. He ignored Frauka, which seemed to suit Frauka fine.

‘Good evening,’ I replied, using my voxsponder.

‘My name is Iader Trice. I am first provost of the Ministry of Sub-sector Trade. I would like to start our conversation by apologising for any unpleasantness this evening.’

‘Unpleasantness?’

‘At the Circus Carnivora. You found yourselves caught up in a routine crime-raid.’

‘A routine raid? I thought you were responding to an altercation in the cavae.’

Trice shrugged. He was handsome, and immaculately groomed and manicured. A real operator. I noticed he had one brown eye and one blue. There was something else about him. An essence. A hint of something I was desperate to put a figurative finger on. But at this stage, under these circumstances, it would have been rude to probe, however discreetly.

‘Our raid had been planned for several weeks, and we’d brought in sections of Magistratum and the PDF. Fairly major scale. The Carnivora is a hotbed of crime and smuggling. We were intending to move in towards the end of the night, but the – altercation, as you put it – forced our hand. I understand this... altercation... was set off by your own investigation.’

‘I had reason to examine the circus. The criminal elements objected to my interest.’

Trice smiled. 'Can I get you a drink?' he asked.

'A little malt liq with a shaving of ice,' replied Frauka, helping himself to another lho-stick.

Trice looked at him.

'I don't,' I said. 'But please indulge my companion.'

Trice fetched Frauka's drink from a stand on a sideboard, and poured himself an amasec. 'The lord governor was most upset to hear that an inquisitor had been caught up in tonight's operation.'

'I'm sure.'

'He extends his best wishes, and asks me to offer my services to you.'

Trice handed the drink to Frauka and looked at me. Like everyone else, he was put-off by the unforthcoming nature of my enclosed chair.

He sat down, facing me, and swirled the amasec in his balloon. 'The Ministry of Sub-sector Trade is a newly created body. I don't know if you're aware of our purview.'

'I am,' I said. 'I'm very familiar with the writings of the lord governor. A perceptive man, a reformer, an innovator. His election to office last year was a thing to be welcomed.'

I meant what I said. Oska Ludolf Barazan, who had been in his time hive mayor, senator plenipotentiary, and, since 400.M41, lord governor of the Angelus sub, was an erudite and forward-thinking politician whose reformist attitudes I much admired. Given the segmentum-wide trend for such offices to fall to under-achievers via nepotism and birthright, Barazan's election seemed like a miracle of liberalism. Generally stagnant men inherited control of stagnant sub-sectors and thus further stagnated them. The Ministry had been part of his election platform. He had wanted to create an active, sharp-toothed instrument that would oversee the workings of Imperial bureaucracy on Eustis Majoris and beyond. Clean them up. Cut the crap. 'Reform' was not wide enough a word.

'I'll pass your comments on to the lord governor,' Trice said. 'He'll be flattered. He is an avid student of your own work.'

I had written a few things: a number of treatises, an extended essay or two. They had been well received. If I'd had a visible face, it would have been blushing.

'He is troubled, however,' Trice went on. 'His central doctrine is openness. Clarity.'

'Full disclosure,' I remarked.

'Quite so. And yet, you chose to operate on the capital world... clandestinely.'

Frauka snorted. Trice looked round at him and he raised his glass. 'Don't mind me,' he said.

'I'm sure,' I said, 'the lord governor is not unfamiliar with the workings of the Inquisition. Our success in preserving the purity of Mankind relies entirely on our unquestioned power. The Inquisition does not have to ask, or obtain permission. It may look where it wishes, and do what it wishes. It is the most absolute power in the Imperium of Man, save the God-Emperor himself.'

'Oh, quite,' said Trice, swirling his drink some more. I notice that he had not touched it. Keeping his mind sharp. 'There is, however, an inference that you did not inform the lord governor of your activities here because you suspected the authorities as well.'

'Of course I did. No offence to the lord governor, but corruption is everywhere. Is that not why he created your Ministry, Provost Trice? To clean the house from the top down? Consider me to be cleaning from the basement up.'

'May I enquire the nature of your investigation?' he asked.

'You may. Prompted by my ordo masters, I have undertaken an investigation into the nature and origin of the addictive substances known as flects.'

Trice frowned. 'Narcotics are a Magistratum matter, and smuggling...'

'The flects are not narcotics, provost. Not in the chemical sense, whatever their characterising traits. They are most definitely xenos in nature.'

'Xenos?' he breathed, uneasy.

‘They are artifacts. Tainted artifacts. Their abuse has spread, these last two years, down through the Angelus sub, into the Helican sub and the Ophidian too. All signs indicate the root of that trade is here on Eustis Majoris.’

Trice got up and set down his untouched drink ‘We... we are on the same side, inquisitor.’

‘I’d hate to doubt it, Mr Trice.’

He smiled at me. ‘I mean to say, we are aware of the flect problem. It is rife here. We... uhm... we know we are the source of it. The fact pains the lord governor greatly. It is, consequently, uppermost in my Ministry’s list of actions. Tonight’s raid on the Carnivora was part of our ongoing war on flect-distribution.’

‘You had identified the circus as a source?’

He nodded. At last, he took a sip of his amasec. ‘The Imperial pits are a focus of contraband crime on many worlds, inquisitor. The staff has powerful contacts with rogue traders and commercial outfitters, all licensed to import xenos-breeds on-planet for the games. It is an obvious source. A trader imports a snarl-cat from Riggion for the circus, under license... What else does he bring in the snarl-cat’s cage? Grinweed. Gladstones. Phetamote thrill-pills baggy-packed into the animal’s intestine.’

‘And flects,’ I said. ‘The ship traders and outfitters are moving flects through the circus businesses. Through other outlets too, I’m sure. Wood, metals, weapons perhaps. But the Imperial pits are key. They have the most open trade permits, necessarily, to cater for the creatures they bring in.’

He nodded again, sagely. There was a click-clacking sound. By the desk, Frauka was trying to light another lho-stick from an ornamental desk igniter that refused to spark. He became aware of us staring at him, and put the igniter down.

‘Sorry,’ he said and pulled a match book out of his jacket.

Trice looked back at me. ‘You detained a man tonight.’

‘His name was Duboe. Chief handlerman at the cavae. A dealer.’

‘My Ministry had suspected as much.’

‘I’d like him returned to me for questioning.’

‘Of course!’ Trice smiled, as if anything else was unthinkable.

‘And I’d like to continue with my work... unimpeded.’

Trice nodded. ‘I have a request. From the lord governor. He asks that we pool our efforts.’

‘How so?’

‘We have information that may assist you... You have the force of the Inquisition behind you to empower it. I have to admit, Inquisitor Ravenor, my Ministry – for all it is newborn and fresh – is hard stretched. We would like to combine our efforts with yours and close off the flect trade at source.’

I slid my chair a few centimetres forward towards him. ‘Your information. Try me.’

Trice pursed his lips. ‘Our investigations have shown that Duboe’s source was a game agent from the outworlds called Feaver Skoh, one of a famous dynasty of xeno-hunters. Skoh operates from a rogue trader called the *Oktober Country*, captain of which is one Kizary Thekla. The *Country* runs the lanes up through our sub to Flint, Ledspar and beyond, sometimes as far as Lenk, every half-year, to buy choice stuff from the beast-moots there. Sometimes they go on into Lucky Space so that Skoh can hunt for himself on the rip-worlds up there. We believe they’re sourcing flects, maybe from the moots, maybe, from Lucky Space.’

‘Trice. Why are you telling me this?’ I asked.

‘In the spirit of cooperation. Full disclosure,’ he said.

‘And?’

He knocked back his drink in one tug. ‘The *Oktober Country* broke orbit fifty minutes ago, without permission from ground traffic. Its last vectored course was up the line to Flint.’

NAYL, KYS AND Kara were waiting for me on the palace pad. Zael was hanging back behind them, and they had Duboe in manacles.

As the drop ship came down out of the night on columns of spitting flame, I rolled out onto the pad to join them, Frauka at my side. Behind me came three figures in soft grey cloth-suits, their crewbags slung over their shoulders: Kinsky, Ahenobarb and a female called Madsen.

Nayl looked at them.

‘Who the hell...?’ he breathed.

‘Say hello,’ I replied. They’re coming with us.’

PART TWO

LUCKY SPACE



ONE

HE'D BEEN ON wherries down the overfloat, tracks and cargo-8s a few times and, once, a train over to Formal R to visit a cousin or some such. He'd been pretty young at the time; he barely remembered the cousin, let alone the train.

He'd never been off the ground for more than a few seconds, never flown, not even in a lifter. He'd certainly never been on a starship.

The guy (Zael still thought of Harlon Nayl as 'the guy' even though he knew his name – it was kind of a comforting thing to cling on to) told him the ship was called the *Hinterlight*. Meant nothing. Might as well have been called *Yer Momma is a Smiley-Girl*, Zael still hadn't heard of it. But he was sort of impressed, and funny-excited. It was a starship, and it was all that word implied. Off-dirt, the void, distant worlds whose names he couldn't spell.

The big deal, as far as Zael saw it, was that they were taking him too. Where, he didn't care. Had to be better than the J stacks. His little, knucked-up life had just taken an interesting swing.

It occurred to him to wonder why they were taking him. The Chair had talked to him several times since he'd hooked up with the guy, said a few things that seemed to indicate that he thought Zael was special somehow. Well, that was fine. The Chair was the big shot in this little gang, and if The Chair thought Zael was special, it probably meant he was.

Though he kind of wanted to know *special how?*

The Chair's gang had been scaring the life out of him since he'd met them, but they were sort of cool too. He'd seen the guy do his thing, for a start. The guy was a piece of work. Then there was Kys. She was as scary as the guy, but in a different way. Zael tended to look aside when Kys

glanced his way. Kara was nicer. She always asked if Zael was doing okay. She was sexy. Kys was probably sexy too, in a blade-thin, dangerous sense, but her scariness got in the way. Kara was just nice, simple as that. And she had these killer curves that made him feel tingly.

Thonius was a freak, though. Unpleasant and sneery. Zael got the feeling Thonius didn't like him much. Well, that was fine. And also mutual. There was Mathuin, who was simply a surly bastard. He reminded Zael of the worst kind of moody. But Zael had to feel a little sorry when the flier stopped to pick Thonius and Mathuin up. The bastard had been hurt bad. There was a lot of blood, and a spew-making smell of crispy flesh. Kara and the guy carried Mathuin into the rear compartment to patch him up.

Zael sat in his seat as the flier rose up out of the city. There were window ports, but he couldn't see much. He could feel it, though, in his stomach. A little up and down. So this was flying. It made him queasy.

The other member of the gang sat down next to him. His name was Frauka, and there was something weird about him. Every time Zael got near him, his head started to hurt. And Frauka smoked all the time.

'Something the matter?' Frauka said, exhaling lho-smoke through his nostrils.

Zael shook his head.

The smoke smelled pretty good, actually. It reminded Zael of the drink-dubs in the stacks. It had been days now since he'd taken a hit of anything. He'd been really witchy-twitchy for a while, but he was better now. He wouldn't have said no to a flect, just a little look, but he didn't crave one. He had the distinct feeling that The Chair had done something to his head. Nothing bad, just... eased it. Cradled it. Taken out the sting.

The Chair could do that. It wouldn't surprise Zael to find out that The Chair could do anything. He really wanted to know what was inside that smooth, matt-black form. He didn't even know what an inquisitor was, not actually, although he knew that everyone he'd ever known got terrified at the mention of the word.

The Chair didn't seem all that terrifying to Zael. Not like Kys, or Mathuin, or the guy. The Chair was more like what Zael imagined the God-Emperor to be. Quiet, faceless, potent, benign.

Or maybe that was just something else The Chair was doing to his mind.

Zael looked down the companionway towards the forward seats of the flier's main compartments, and wondered about the others. The newcomers. One, haggard and blood-flecked, sat on his own, his chain binders anchored to a seat restraint. Zael knew he was called Duboe, and had witnessed the final moments of his apprehension in the Carnivora. That had been another first. Zael had never been to the big circus before.

Zael wondered what Duboe had done. He certainly felt for him. With Kys and Thonius and Mathuin around, Zael sure as hell wouldn't have wanted to be a prisoner here.

Then there were the other three. They kept themselves apart from The Chair's gang. They were dressed in identical suits of fine-quality grey cloth, but they were far from identical themselves. One was very large, bigger than the guy even, his muscles stretching at the cut of his jacket. His skin was dark, though not as black as Mathuin's, and he had a little trimmed moustache line and clan-style piercings in his left eyebrow. His black hair was short and downy. There was something primitive about him, something coarse. He was very still. He reminded Zael of pict's he'd seen, pict's of huge lizards sun-basking on rocks, stock-still and blank for days at a time, jaws agape. Waiting, waiting to explode into fury and eat something alive.

The woman seemed to be in charge. Her name was Madsen – Zael had heard her introduced to Kara. She was white-blonde and slender, with a hard, pinched face that would have been really pretty if it hadn't been so tight. She spoke to her two companions now and then in a low voice that no one could overhear.

The other one, the stringy man, was more alarming. Zael had an impression of a balding, blond creep, but for some reason, every time he looked at him, Zael saw nothing but a sort of blur. Like the creep wasn't

really there. Or like he was twice, and the two-ness of him was making him appear distorted.

Once during the flight, when Zael was looking at the creep, the creep had turned and looked back at Zael, as if feeling his eyes on him. The creep's stare was like hot wires. It said *look someplace else, you little freak*.

Zael had looked away fast.

He peered out of the window. The flier shivered as it climbed. Zael suddenly saw spots of fire in the dark and cried out.

'What the frig's the matter?' Frauka asked him, petulantly.

Zael pointed.

'Stars. They're stars. Haven't you ever seen stars before?'

Another first.

HE'D EXPECTED some grand fanfare and ceremony – this was a starship after all. But there was simply a thud, and a scraping sound and the flier's hatch had opened to reveal another hatch, which had opened to display a dank, greasy metal corridor.

And everyone had just got up and got out.

Zael felt cheated. He'd wanted to see the starship and understand where he was going. This oily deckhall could have been the back stacks of J, anywhere.

The Chair slid past him.

+Find our friend a cabin and make him comfortable.+

The guy nodded, and turned back to Zael.

'Come here, boy. I've got to—'

'Find me a cabin and make me comfortable,' Zael said.

The guy faltered. 'Yeah... that's right.'

Zael was busy lifting his feet one at a time and putting them back down on the deck grille. The strange, fluid sensation made him smile.

'What?' asked the guy.

'Weird,' said Zael.

‘A-G,’ said the guy.

‘What’s that?’

‘The ship’s artificial gravity. You’ll get used to it.’

‘What’s... gravity?’

A RECORDING OF sweeping orchestral music was being broadcast at high volume across the bridge of the *Hinterlight*. Somebody or other’s Ninth Symphony, laden with strings, brass and kettle drums. It was one of ship-mistress’s idiosyncrasies, a little ritual. She liked to break orbit with something appropriately stirring blasting from the vox. Besides, she claimed, it helped the Navigators compose the course.

‘Down three,’ she said as she saw me enter the bridge by the after hatch. The music muted appropriately.

‘Thonius tells me we’re off to Flint.’

‘To begin with,’ I replied, using the voxsponder. I did this out of respect. For some reason, she had always objected to me mind-speaking. ‘It could be a long run. Right up the lane to Lenk, if needs be.’

Cynia Preest pouted. ‘No bugger goes to Lenk any more.’

‘Some buggers do. The sort I’m after. I hope to catch them before that. Certainly before they hit Lucky Space.’

She tilted back her head and laughed. Then stopped. Then looked at me with narrowed eyes. ‘You’re joking?’

‘It’s been known, but not at the moment.’

‘Shit!’ she said, and turned away and then said it again, with equal vehemence. ‘Shit! I am not... categorically not... going to take my darling into Lucky Space.’

‘Cynia...’

‘No. No way, Gideon. Flint’s bad enough. It’s only borderline Imperial these days. But Lucky Space? I am not taking the *Hinterlight* out of sub territory, especially not there. There are pirates out there, dark kin, brigands, death worlds, rip-worlds—’

‘The people we’re shadowing have a particular interest in rip-worlds,’ I said.

‘Well, lucky them. They can enjoy them on their own.’

She walked away from me, cussing my parentage, and leaned over the pilot console, resting her hands on the spoked brass wheel. I knew what this was about: Majeskus. I’d enjoyed a fine working relationship with Shipmistress Preest until Majeskus. God-Emperor, it still haunted me. I have never – will never – forget the desperate voices of Will Tallowhand, Eleena Koi and Norah Santjack as they crackled over the vox in the moments before their doom. Nor have I forgotten the damage done to the *Hinterlight*. How many was it? Fifty, sixty per cent of the crew? May the Throne of Terra keep the soul of Zygmunt Molotch burning in agony forever. Sometimes I wished that bastard was still alive so I could kill him all over again.

But he was dead, incinerated on Zenta Malhyde, and my friends and allies were dead and gone also. And that was then, and this was now.

Cynia had ramped the volume up to full again. The bridge space shook with symphonic pomp.

‘Cynia!’

She pretended she hadn’t heard.

+Cynia.+

She snapped round to glare at me. ‘Not to put too fine a point on it, I’m bloody unhappy about this.’

+Cynia...+

‘Don’t mind-chat me! Talk like a regular human, or get off my deck!’

‘As you wish,’ I said, switching back to voxsponder.

‘Better,’ said Cynia Preest, and dimmed the music. ‘Throne, Gideon, I’m afraid.’

‘Afraid?’

‘It’ll happen again, won’t it? Sooner or later. We’ll meet a bastard tougher than us and he’ll hurt us bad.’

‘Zygmunt Molotch was a genius-psychotic. A Cognitae-schooled freak. An aberration. Yes, he hurt us. More than hurt us. But he’s gone now. Get Harlon up here and he’ll relish telling you how he flamed Molotch’s arse on Malhyde. We’re after safer game, Cynia. Crim-smugglers who’ve hooked up with game agents. They scour the rip-worlds and everything else out there for viable circus beasts. There’s very little risk.’

Mistress Preest scowled at me. ‘That’s what you said last time.’

She turned back to the helm position and studied it for a while. The *Hinterlight*’s bridge was surprisingly small for such a large vessel, essentially because it had been rebuilt in drydock after the Majeskus incident. Six months’ expensive reconstruction, courtesy of the Guild Mechanicus, who’d only agreed to touch a rogue trader because of the influence I’d brought to bear through the Ordos Helican. A compact strategium well contained the actuality sphere. Behind it, a double hatch let into the shipmistress’s ready room. Fore of the strategium, a simple, sloping bay contained the helm stations and the Navigator’s socket. Bridge crew and servitors scurried round. Oliphant Twu of the Navis Nobilite was already plugged in to that socket, his lids shut, reading ghost stars on all three retinas.

‘I have a course, mistress,’ he reported in a slow, lazy voice. ‘Flint. To orbit, four days.’

‘Hold it ready, if you please, Navigator.’ Preest looked at me.

‘Cynia...’

‘Don’t you bloody “Cynia” me!’ Cynia Preest exploded again. ‘Be at your beck and call, fine! Carry you and your band of killers around the known stars, fine! But this...’

Cynia Preest was mistress of the *Hinterlight*, and my pilot. She was two hundred and eighty-four years old, although she always gave her age as ‘twenty-seven and a bit’. Clad in a gold-suede bodyglove and red velvet robes, she was an imposing figure, womanly but robust, and just now becoming stocky and matronly. She had cropped, bleached hair, heavy make-up shadow over her eyes, and favoured excessive dangling earrings.

I always thought she could have passed as a tavern hostess or a smile-girl madam, but for the tracery of fibre-wire inlay that ran down the left side of her face.

‘Lucky Space...’ She spat out the words.

Elman Halstrom, Cynia’s deputy and first officer, had wandered over to join us while we had been talking. Modestly built, with a genial, heart-shaped face and slightly down-turned, put-upon eyes, he was a Navy veteran, and always immaculate. His thinning black hair was oiled back fleet-fashion, and he wore the formal uniform of Battlefleet Scarus, though every insignia, pip and crest had been removed from it. Even the embossed buttons had been replaced by plain bone disks. I understood he’d been a captain once, though I knew nothing about the circumstances surrounding his exit from service. Cynia had engaged him – like so many of the crew – after Majeskus.

‘We are fit and running free,’ he reported. Halstrom was precise and clipped when it came to duties, a legacy of his years in the Fleet, but he was not beyond informality. I liked him. He could yarn a good tale and deliver a fine jest. ‘Eustis Majoris control has cleared us for system exit. Course is ready and held. Enginarium reports jump speed at your discretion.’

Preest nodded.

‘I couldn’t help but overhear,’ he added. ‘She’s mentioned brigands, I take it?’

‘She has,’ I said.

There was a twitch of a smile on his small, rounded mouth. ‘Dark kin? Death-worlds?’

‘All noted, Mr Halstrom. The shipmistress has made all her objections abundantly clear. I will endeavour to make sure our voyage has to go no further than Flint.’

‘Well then, that’s excellent.’ Halstrom glanced at Cynia. ‘Mistress?’

Preest glared at me again, and then walked away to the main throne in the centre of the bridge. There she sat down and oversaw final preparation for

warp translation.

‘A word, if I may?’ Halstrom said to me. He leaned over as he spoke, as if my three-sixty degree audio receptors wouldn’t catch his confidence somehow, as if craning for an ear to whisper into. The gesture touched me.

‘Of course.’

We left the bridge and proceeded down the midships companionway. Halstrom walked slowly by my side.

‘I understand we have guests?’

As first officer, it fell to Halstrom to supervise matters of shipboard security.

‘We have. I’ve told them to make themselves available for induction interviews at your convenience. For now, they’re restricted at my instruction to the quarters I’ve provided in my deck.’

‘Do you want them to remain restricted?’

‘Not unduly. Not so that we appear rude. Standard prohibitions, I think... no access to the enginarium, the arsenal or any private cabins. I feel it is up to you and the mistress to decide what rules you set for them.’

‘I see. And, though I will interview them, what can you tell me about them?’

‘Not a great deal at this stage. They are agents of an official department known as the Ministry of Sub-sector Trade, and answer directly to the lord governor sub-sector himself. They have influence and power. A mishandled situation could cause a rift between the ordos and sub-sector government.’

‘We wouldn’t want that,’ smiled Halstrom. ‘And might a situation arise that could result in mishandling?’

‘It might,’ I replied. ‘One of them is a potent psyker. I suggest you have Frauka present when you interview him.’

Halstrom was silent for a moment. We had almost reached the end of the long companionway. Ahead, it split into the through-deck corridors and the main dorsal elevator bank.

‘Obviously,’ Halstrom said, then, gently, ‘I know only what you and the shipmistress care to tell me about your work, on Eustis Majoris. But I know enough to understand that you deliberately conducted your operation on the planet clandestinely. As it was explained to me, you felt you could trust no one. Not even the authorities.’

‘That’s still the case, Mr Halstrom. I’m attempting to locate the source of a material that is undoubtedly warp-tainted. It is used as... as a drug, essentially. Recreational. But it is no narcotic. It is heretical. To obtain it, and smuggle it onto the sub-sector capital world and elsewhere... that requires friends in high places, I believe. So I tried to keep my business quiet. Unfortunately, fate decided otherwise.’

‘So these guests are here under sufferance?’

‘Quite so. They’re here because it is diplomatic to cooperate with them, not because I trust them.’

A buzzer sounded and amber lamps began to flash along the length of the corridor. Halstrom stepped back and took careful, experienced hold of the nearest handrail, and I cut my chair’s lift and maglocked it down to the deck. There was a slight tremor, then twenty seconds of vibration combined with a flickering, time-lapse impairment to my vision. The rumble of the main drives grew louder.

Then the buzzer stopped and the lights ceased. We had passed the translation point. Now the *Hinterlight* was travelling at something close to maximum velocity, outside realspace, traversing the treacherous oceans of the warp.

‘I should return to my duties,’ said Halstrom, releasing the handrail. ‘Thank you, inquisitor, for your time and candour.’

‘Mr Halstrom?’ He paused and returned to me.

‘How long will I keep Preest?’ I asked.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. ‘I can’t answer that, sir. Only the shipmistress decides. It would not be out of turn for me to mention that she has complained to me many times about the risks involved in

continuing to act as your contracted conveyor. She is scared. That business six years ago. It's fair to say it destroyed her faith in you.'

'I know,' I said. The toneless voxsponder did nothing to convey the sadness in my words. 'Cynia and the *Hinterlight* have been part of my operation for... well, it will be thirty years next spring. I can't bear the idea of sundering that arrangement, or the idea of having to find another shipmaster to trust. But the last few years have been difficult. She's spoken of breaking our contract?'

He shook his head. 'Mistress Preest would never be so unprofessional. But her agreement with you and the ordos is up for renewal on the anniversary. She has mentioned that it might be time for a change. Time to return to free trading, perhaps in the Ophidian sub, where merchant business is said to be booming. Of course, she will miss the security of the ordos stipend and retainer fees.'

'But not the danger?'

'Not the danger, no, sir.'

'I understand how you feel,' I said, turning my chair towards the nearest elevator.

'Me, sir? No, sir,' he said. 'The mistress has been hurt once, and perhaps has lost her nerve. I can sympathise. But a little run up into Lucky Space, hunting for heretics? That sounds rather exciting to me.'

THE CABIN, BADLY lit and untidy, was pretty much the only place in the Imperium Harlon Nayl thought of as home. In a long, bruising life extended by juvenat treatments – Nayl was just over a hundred, standard, but looked a robust late-thirties – he had known a number of homes. Loki – cold, hard, unforgiving Loki – was his birthworld, but he'd overstayed his welcome there pretty much the same day he decided to follow his brothers into the bounty-hunting business. Loki hadn't been home for a long time now. He'd wandered for some years, not so much in pursuit of work but because pursuit was his work. Then he'd crossed paths with an inquisitor called Eisenhorn.

As part of Eisenhorn's band, he'd had residence in a number of places, and remembered most fondly the Ocean House of Thracian Primaris and Eisenhorn's estate, Spaeton House, on Gudrun. Both of those were memories now, just as Eisenhorn himself was. No one had seen the inquisitor since the affair on Ghul back in the eighties. Nayl often wondered if Eisenhorn was dead. So many of them were from that time... Fischig, Aemos, Tobias Maxilla, Eleena Koi. That's what this life did; it killed you, sooner or later. Serve the ordos of the Holy Inquisition, and eventually that duty got you dead.

Nayl pressed the hatch-stud and closed the door behind him. He moved through the gloom, and snapped on a few glow-globes. A status monitor by the door showed a pulsing red light. They were warp-bound now. He'd felt the shudder.

His cabin was quite small and situated on the end of a corridor. The shipmistress had bequeathed an entire deck to Ravenor and his entourage as their own private, sovereign state. The *Hinterlight's* crew never came here, except by invitation. It was even off-limits to the cleaning servitors, which probably explained why his room smelled of socks.

To his left, in an alcove, an unmade bunk, surrounded by scattered clothes, data-slates and books. Various pict-shots decorated the wall over the cot like a shrine. Most of them were faded, the emulsion peeling. In the main part of the room stood a small table and three chairs, a codifier terminal linked to the vessel's data system, and a row of recessed cupboards built in between the bulkheads. To his right was the sliding door into the head and the upright washroom.

Nayl dropped his kitbag on the floor, where it became one of many. The main area was littered with equipment packs, rolled-up body gloves, boots, pieces of armour, tools, and various weapons that he really should have returned to the arsenal. One of these days he was going to get up in the night for a piss and tread on a loaded hand-cannon. Then he'd have to do some frigging explaining. And, most likely, go hunting for some missing toes.

Nayl wandered across to the bulkhead cupboards. He was limping. He ached. The free-for-all in the Carnivora had been less than fun. Reaching out to the cupboard latch, he noticed how skinned and raw his knuckles were. Grime-black, caked in dried blood, the calloused skin torn. He needed a shower. The effort didn't appeal to him.

He raised his left hand and held it out alongside his right. The missing finger seemed like a smack-in-the-mouth slur, an offensive lack. Ironical... that finger had once been his favourite insult. Now its very absence seemed obscene. All these frigging years, he been shot and stabbed and left for dead but he'd never lost a part of himself. It was like an omen. He'd never needed augmetics. He thought of Gregor Eisenhower, replacing and supporting his battle-torn body bit by bit. Then – shit – he thought of Ravenor.

Was this where it started? Was this the beginning of the end? First a finger, then what? An arm? A leg? A major organ...

He'd liked that frigging finger. It had been on his top ten list of favourite fingers.

He poured himself a drink, amasec, from a bottle in the cupboard. It took him a while to find a glass, and longer to decide that the glass didn't actually have to be clean. Sipping it, he reached out to press the activator stud of the player unit in the cupboard. Nothing happened. So that's what that finger had been for. He used an existing finger this time, and low volume melodies flowed out into the cabin.

He'd have to go and see Antribus, get himself a new finger, augmetic, whatever and—

Nayl paused. Antribus? Ravenor's medicae was six years dead. One of Molotch's victims at Majeskus. The *Hinterlight* had a new medicae now. Nayl couldn't remember the fellow's name.

He sat down at the table, looking for a space to put his drink down. A carapace armour unit occupied most of the table top. He'd been repairing it on the way to Eustis Majoris, and the job was unfinished. He pushed aside powered drivers and stinky pots of lube.

The music was good. It was an old tune, one of his favourites. He hummed along, taking off his shoulder rig and disarming his pistol.

He took off his boots. He was hungry. He was sleepy. He was pissed off.

He was old.

He was thinking about the guests as he walked over to the bulkhead cupboards for a refill. He didn't like it, not at all. Didn't like them. Something about them, probably no more than the fact they were intruding into his work, into the inquisitor's work. Kinsky was dangerous. The other two... who knew? Nayl reckoned he could take Ahenobarb out, if it came to it. Madsen, though. She was a blank page. And only the inquisitor could handle Kinsky.

He heard a little noise outside his cabin door. Just a little noise. A glance reminded him he'd left the hatch unlocked.

Nayl put down his drink and picked up a sleek Tronsvasse 38 from under a pile of soiled domes. Its tiny red tell-tale light showed it was loaded and armed.

He walked towards the door, gun raised, and popped the stud.

Zael as good as fell into the room.

'What the hell are you doing here?' Nayl asked.

'I got scared,' the boy said.

A LITTLE AMASEC calmed him down. The drink made him flushed and smiley. He lolled on the edge of Nayl's bunk, holding the glass in both hands.

'What's this frigging music?' he asked.

'It's frigging bouzoukis playing frigging reels from my frigging homeworld,' said Nayl from his seat at the table.

Zael thought about this. 'It's a bit plinky-plunky, isn't it?'

'Not to me.'

'Just saying.'

'Don't.'

‘Okay.’

The boy swung his legs and looked around.

‘When do we set off?’ he asked.

Nayl looked at him. ‘We’ve been in transit for about thirty minutes already.’

‘Oh.’

‘Didn’t you feel the translation?’

‘No. What was that, then?’

Nayl sighed. ‘The moment we went warp. A vibration? A shaking?’

‘Oh, that’s what it was. I thought—’

‘Thought what?’

‘Nothing.’

Thought what?’

Zael smiled a weak grin. ‘I thought it was withdrawal. I’ve been getting witchy-twitchy now and then,’ Nayl snorted and knocked back some drink.

‘Where are we going?’ Zael asked. ‘Never you mind.’

Zael pursed his lips and rocked back and forward. He looked around. ‘You’ve got a lot of guns in here.’ ‘Don’t touch anything.’ ‘Well, duh!’

Nayl frowned. ‘And don’t tell Ravenor I’ve got a lot of guns in here either. He’ll only fret.’ ‘Okay.’

Zael took a sip from his glass and flopped back on the bunk so he was looking upside-down at the pics Nayl had stuck on the wall there. ‘Who’s that?’ Nayl looked across.

‘That’s Kara.’

‘She looks different.’

‘Her hair was black then. It was a few years ago.’

‘She’s nice.’

‘Yeah, she is.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘That’s Will. Will Tallowhand. And the girl is Eleena Koi.’

‘They look nice.’

‘They were the best. Friends of mine.’

‘Are they on board?’

‘No, Zael. They’re dead.’

‘Oh.’

His feet stopped swinging for a moment, but he still lay on his back and stared up at the pict.

‘My mumma and pappa are dead. And my granna. And Nove.’

‘Who’s Nove?’

‘My sister. She fell off a stack.’

‘I’m sorry about that.’

‘It wasn’t your fault.’ Zael pointed. ‘Who’s that?’

‘Kara again.’

‘She looks so different each time.’

Nayl leaned back and smiled. ‘That’s Kara. But she’s always Kara.’

‘Is she your girl?’

Nayl laughed. ‘I wish. Once, almost and sort of. Kara and me are friends now.’

‘She’s laughing a lot on that pict. She looks pretty. Why is the bottom half of it folded up?’

Nayl frowned and leaned forward to look at the pict, then grinned and leaned back again into his seat. ‘Because I knew one day I’d end up with a maybe-teen boy in my cabin who’d ask all sorts of frigging stupid questions and get over excited at the sight of bare bosoms.’

Zael sat up, maintaining his gaze on the pict.

‘Her bosoms were bare?’

‘Yeah, they were,’ Nayl cupped his glass and looked down into it. He remembered the night. Fooling around, drinking, laughing, making love. Kara had brought the picter along. Nayl wondered if she’d kept the pictures of him.

‘I bet they’re really nice...’ Zael whispered.

‘I’m not even going to have this conversation,’ snarled Nayl.

There was a painfully long silence.

‘Yeah, they really are,’ Nayl admitted at last. They both started laughing. Really laughing. Zael rocked back and forth, snorting and wheezing.

God-Emperor, it was the best laugh Nayl had found in a very long time.

‘Understand me,’ said Nayl, fighting his laughter, ‘you ever take that pict down to look at the fold, I’ll kill you.’

‘That’s fair,’ giggled Zael. ‘You have lots of guns. Probably worth it, though.’

‘Oh yeah.’

They burst out laughing again.

‘Who’s that? He looks like a real hard knuck.’

‘Who are you pointing to? Oh, yeah. That’s Eisenhorn.’

Zael looked at Nayl. ‘And he is?’

‘Dead, I think. My old boss. Another inquisitor.’

‘The Chair’s not your first boss then?’

Nayl smiled. *The Chair*. Funny, and obvious the kid would think that way. ‘No, I worked for Eisenhorn before.’

‘He looks like a double-hard bastard.’

‘He was.’

‘So how long have you worked for The Chair?’

Nayl had to think about it. It had been a fluid thing. He’d been in Eisenhorn’s band for a long time, right up until the infamous mission to Ghul, really. But by then he’d also been working with Ravenor. When Eisenhorn disappeared, that arrangement had sort of become permanent.

‘Since the late eighties, pretty much. Nearly fifteen years.’

Zael nodded.

‘Who’s that?’

‘That’s Ravenor.’

Zael sat up and peered hard at the pict. 'He's really handsome. Is that what he looks like now, inside that chair?'

'No, Zael, it isn't.'

'What happened to him?'

'Thracian Primaris, back in '38. The Triumph. A great procession of the great and good. The forces of the Enemy struck, and caused a... a... well, it's been called the Atrocity. Ravenor was caught in a firestorm and burned really badly. He's been in that force chair ever since. His mind is the only thing left to him.'

Zael considered this. 'That's really bad,' he said. 'Yes, it is.' 'And who's that?' Nayl leaned forward to see. 'Now, that's—'

He stopped. 'Damn,' he said, 'I've forgotten to do something important.'

ZARJARAN. THAT WAS the new medicae's name. Zarjaran. Nayl nodded to him as he swept Zael through the infirmary towards the cryo-stacks.

The hatch opened. Cold air fumed out.

There she lay, sleeping like she had done ever since '86.

'Is she dead?' Zael asked.

'No, she's not.'

'Alive?'

Nayl frowned. 'Not that either.'

'She's very beautiful.'

'Yeah, she is. Look... every time I come back aboard, I make a point of saying hello to her. Maybe she can hear me, maybe not. She's been in this... state for fifteen years. She was Eisenhower's most loyal ally, and a good friend to me too.'

'What was her name?' Zael wondered.

'Alizabeth Bequin. Lizebeth? Hi. It's me. Harlon. Just come to say hello.'

'She's frozen!' Zael said.

'Yeah. She's not dead or alive, just preserved here. Maintained in the cold-hold of the *Hinterlight* for a decade and a half. Maybe she'll live

again one day. Maybe she's dead. I like to think she can still hear us.'

Zael leaned forward and pressed his hand against the armaglas cover of the cryo-bin. His fingerprints remained as frost-blooms.

'Hello lady,' he said. 'My name is Zael.'



TWO

‘SCREW THIS,’ SAID Madsen, turning and climbing back down the grassy slope. ‘It’s a waste of time.’

Carl Thonius nodded. They’d missed this beast-moot by several weeks. The vast stock yards were empty. A bitter gale swept across the derelict pastures where the tents and cage-pens had been pitched. Some rusting iron pegs and hoops and a copious amount of dried, white dung were the only signs that this area had seen any life in years.

The sky was grey and fast: sliced strata of cloud hurtling west across the salty margin, beyond which the dark ocean boomed and rattled.

‘We’ll push south,’ Madsen said. Thonius nodded again, but realised she had been directing the words at Ahenobarb and Kinsky. They were wandering the sparse moot-space. The psyker was saying something, but his voice was hindered by the wind. Ahenobarb hovered close to Kinsky, waiting, watching.

‘What did he say?’ Thonius asked, squinting. Madsen looked at him. The wind tugged at her white-blond hair. ‘The usual psyker crap, Mr Thonius,’ she said.

THE WESTERN BANKS was hard, saline country, a ragged hem where the great plains of Flint’s largest continent met the uncharted sea. The planet boasted a few thriving colony cities down in the temperate south, but it was out here in the unforgiving west that the trade on which Flint prospered was conducted: stock, beast-flesh, meat.

Dynasties of stockmen, drovers and herders inhabited the great plains, dutifully following routes and trails established by their ancestors, driving the super-herds. Straight-horn, flange-horn, demi-pachyderm, the behemoth tuskers. Drove-dynasties specialised in one breed or another,

catered their skills and disciplines to that breed, but all for the same purpose: driving them west each season for the beast-moots along the Western Banks.

Moot-towns studded the broken coastline like buckles on a tangled belt: Droverville, Salthouse, Trailend, Huke's Town, West Bank, West Trail, Endrover, Fleshton, Slaughterhouses, Ocean Point, Mailer's Yards, Beastberg, Great West Moot, Tusk Verge. To each one, at the close of each season, the stock was brought in to market. Off-world traders thronged around each moot, landing their fliers and bulk-lifters on the scorched commerce fields to inspect the best of the merchandise.

Nayl and Kara had headed up towards Huke's Town and all points north. Thonius's team was covering the southern reach of the Banks.

The wind off the foreshore was picking up.

Kys was waiting for them by the half-track they'd leased from a drove specialist in West Bank. Thonius and the three Ministry agents trudged down to join her on the bleak roadway.

She was looking out to sea. The dark ocean was crashing in onto the rudely worn rocks, each wave impacting with a sound of shattering glass.

THEY DROVE SOUTH along the coast highway, the sea on one side, the slipped, craggy land on the other. The road was unmetalled and raw. Several times they had to slow to overtake work gangs on foot. Some were freelance drovers, shabby in treated hides, trudging with decorated herd-poles held aloft towards the next moot. They looked like troglodytes to Kys: skin-clad, caked in dung and clay that had dried white, their leaders decorated with skulls and antlers.

Other work gangs were slaughtermen, dressed in long, button-front black coats, and carrying the ritual chain-blades in engraved biers stretched over their shoulders. Their shaven faces were marked with finger-drawn patterns of blood.

Kys slowed and leaned out of the cab to question them. 'Beast-moot?'

Their answers were contradictory and useless.

THEY PASSED THROUGH empty, wind-blown coast towns: Endrover, Western End, Tally Point. The places had been scarred and eroded by the ocean's eternal blast and now, out of moot-season, were almost devoid of life. Tall grasses grew in the moot-yards; the buildings were shackled up and boarded. Paint peeled. The great raised stock-boards over the highway displayed fading chalk-scrawls costing last season's going rate for tusk-bison.

The towns were an odd mix. Big or small, wealthy or struggling, they followed the same essential pattern: wide tracts of commerce fields for the off-world ships to land, wider and greater moot fields where the stock was penned and displayed, and little clutches of buildings, the town itself. Taverns and barter halls, constructed in the local style, using great, curved beams as both wall posts and rafters, with a wattle-and-daub of mud-straw and flak-board in between, sat alongside more modern, rockcrete-built rendering silos. Kys wondered aloud where on this treeless plateau the locals had found the timber to raise the old barter-halls.

'Not timber... tusks,' Thonius said. 'Some of these buildings are very old. Traditionally, they use the tusks of mature animals as frame ribs.'

Kys was driving. She slowed right down as they passed through Tally Point. The bare, yellowed ribs forming the superstructure of the weatherbeaten town hall were twenty metres long.

'What kind of animal carries—'

'None. Not any more,' said Thonius. 'The real big, mature bulls were all slaughtered centuries ago, during the early colonisation. A bull has to live a good few hundred years to sport tusks like that. We'll not see their like again.'

Kys looked across at him. 'But they still herd these things here?'

Thonius nodded. 'It's the key to Flint's economy. The big placental herbivores grow fast, put on a lot of mass. The great plains are lush. A demi-pachyderm can develop enough bulk to be worth slaughtering in under five years. But their tusks don't grow half as fast. Given the rate of

supply and demand, this world will never see another giant bull with eighteen metre tusks.'

'The stuff you know,' she chuckled.

He smiled back. 'I know what every trade economist worth his salt knows... and what every slaughterbaron on Flint chooses to ignore... at this rate of slaughter, Flint will be wasted out in another century.'

She realised there was nothing but grim finality in his smile. 'The stuff you know,' she murmured again.

They pressed on south, through several dead towns that trade and life had already disowned: Fleshton, West Walkaway, Ling's Berg. The yards there were totally overgrown, the drystone pen walls collapsed. In each town, the buildings were faded and abandoned. Kys saw crumbling jetties and fallen-down piers half-overwhelmed by the ocean spray. Once the trade had come by sea, shipping the meat down to the southern cities on barges.

Not any more.

THERE WAS A small moot in Mailer's Yards and another in Hidebarter. They spent a while in both, checking the moot's record books and ledgers for off-world buyers. The locals were far from compliant. Flint had no centralised record of its visitors. The moots compiled their own archives. Space traffic was deregulated. High orbit above Flint was filled with thousands of trading spaceships, none of which advertised its identity with a transponder. Only the ledgers of a town's baron could say who was around. Any trader who wanted to do business at a moot had to register himself.

In the crowded market places, amid the jostling, shamanlike drovers with their clay-caked flesh and andered heads, and the armoured finery of off-world traders, sober-suited agents from the Departamento Munitorum went from dynast to dynast, performing the never-ending task of assessing trade for the purposes of Imperial levy. There was noise everywhere: the chattering bark of the drovers bartering, the shouts of the stock

auctioneers, the clatter of tallyboards, and the constant background lowing of the vast flange-horn herds in the moot yards.

Neither moot had any record of the ship they were after. In Mailer's Yards, Thonius and Madsen went into the barter-hall to inspect the local baron's own archives. Kys waited outside on the ivory decking with Ahenobarb and Kinsky. The scrawny psyker went to the bone rail and stood, looking out across the jostling market towards the fuming sea. Kys could feel a pin-prickle of psi-use, but it was not directed at her. She wondered how many minds in mat marketspace Kinsky was idly rifling through.

The facade of the barter-hall glittered brilliantly every time the sun came out from behind the chasing clouds. It was covered with thousands of silver disks, each one about a thumb-span in diameter, no two identical. They were all nailed in place. Fish scales, she realised, from some pelagic giant. They were as hard and simple as everything else on this beleaguered frontier, but somehow had a beauty that Flint did not.

Ahenobarb had seen the scales too. He reached out to take one down as a trophy, and then snatched back his hand. He glared at Kys, sucking blood from sliced finger tips. The scale edges were razor-sharp.

Kys unhooked three using her telekinesis, and floated them across to her. They glinted in the air. She hung all three over the top button-stud of her body glove using the nail-holes in their centres. They shone like a badge of office at her throat.

Thonius and Madsen emerged from the hall. They had learned nothing to their advantage.

'Except,' said Thonius, 'the Tusk Verge moot begins tonight.'

THE TUSK VERGE moot was amongst the biggest held on Flint, almost on the scale of the Winter Great Moot and the Spring Drove. They drove the sixty kilometres to Tusk Verge through the late afternoon, and while they were yet some distance from the town, they saw the first signs of it.

Initially, contrails in the cold, bright sky. Criss-crossing lines of vapour that spoke of heavy inter-orbit traffic. Then a few fliers, shuttles, zipping over, then a pair of battered bulk-lifters that grumbled along overhead and blotted out the sun.

The traffic on the highway got denser. Herdsmen, slaughtermen, a few troupes of entertainers. Then caravans of slow-moving, high-sided wagons drawn by oxen or traction engines. The wind trailed back a chalky dust from the caravans that carried the sour bite of ammonia. There was money to be made from collecting up a herd's droppings and selling it on for phosphates and fertilizers. Colonies on mineral-poor worlds paid generously for Flint's excrement.

Just five kilometres from the town, they saw greater clouds against the horizon, billowing from inland. They were white, like low-mist rolling in banks, but they were dust. The dust of the super-herds coming in down the ancient drove roads.

THE HIGHWAY ENTERED Tusk Verge over a stone viaduct two kilometres long. Beneath its broad arches, spread out on the wide coastal plains, was a portion of the moot's pens and gated yards, a giant patchwork of drystone enclosures through which animals could be driven, penned off, separated, counted. High-walled droveways led up to the commerce fields where the cargo haulers of the orbiting trade ships lined up to be filled. In the failing light, blue and yellow flares came intermittently from the direction of the commerce fields, the afterglow of landing jets and atmospheric drives.

The stock was pouring into the town locale through the drove gates along the eastern perimeter. The ancient trackways and drove roads, scoured into the Great Plains by generations of herds, had been dug down through the coastal cliffs, forming high-flanked cuttings and gorges that funnelled the incoming livestock down into the pens of the moot yards. Stockmen hauled on massive iron swing-gates, directing one herd or herd-portion into this pen, another into that. One dynast's animals were kept from another's, or a major herd was portioned down into commercial parcels. Brandsmen went from pen to pen, checking flesh-brands and ear slashes

for provenance and ownership, while tallymen collected up bronze tally rings of appropriate value from drove men, and clattered them onto the abacus-like tally boards they carried. The rise and fall of stock values and the going rates for certain beasts of a certain weight was set by the slaughterbaron and his cartel, based on the accumulated tallies, and then chalked up on the massive boards overlooking the auction arenas.

Beyond them, lit by oil-drum fires, stood the long halls where buyers could inspect sample animals, and then the long, grim silos of the rendering plant. Some traders bought dead meat and salted or froze it for shipment to the cheap food-marts down sub. Others bought live and shipped it – sometimes in stasis – to more discerning clients on the wealthier hive worlds of Angelus. Some bought low quality in bulk, others high quality animals, individually chosen and purchased. Some came for the mechanically-recovered meat products of the rendering plant, others for phosphate dung. A ten tonne demi-pach might fetch twenty crowns a tonne, get turned into thirty thousand meat patties to be sold at half a crown a time in the food-stalls of a hive's slum-hab. A sixty kilo shorthorn might fetch five times as much, because it was destined to sell as a prime imported delicacy in the up-hive restaurants of Eustis Majoris and Caxton at fifty crowns a pop.

The firedrums lit the evening with greasy flames. The air was heady with the autumnal stinks of blood, dung, fire, herbivore gas and baled feed. They pulled off the viaduct, parked the half-track in a rockcrete yard where other tracks had been left, and went looking for the slaughterbaron.

INEVITABLY, THE LIVESTOCK trade up and down the Angelus sub overlapped the pit-game business. Traders shipping a hold full of pachs might as well make some extra fees carrying more dangerous animals for the Imperial pits, and game agents in need of transport often hired stock traders because they already had a lot of the specialised holding equipment.

The beast-moots of Flint were primarily livestock oriented. Occasionally drovers brought a great plains predator to market for extra cash, but the commerce of the Western Banks was essentially about meat. Further up

the line, out towards Lenk and the rip-worlds, that was where you found the specialist beast-moots, the ones held entirely for the pit-trade.

Even so, Flint's beast-moots were frequented by the game agents. Some were passing through on their way to Lenk. Others came to buy cheap meat-cuts for bait and feed: many of the pit-favourite carnivores grew too placid if cargoed in stasis, and a full grown taurosaur ate its own weight in meat several times over during six weeks live-haul. Some agents came to Flint to purchase big herbivores that could be goaded into violence for specialised bouts and others yet came because they were travelling as paying passengers on livestock trade ships and had no say where the shipmaster put in.

Baron Julius Karquin had ran Tusk Verge for sixty years. In his rich, off-planet robes and lime-clayed animal hide cloak, he seemed a man caught between two worlds, part businessman, part shaman. During the moot, he held court in one of the tusk-frame pavilions in the town centre.

An entourage of slaughtermen, tallymen and dynasts surrounded him, along with market advisors and record keepers. Distinguished far traders were admitted to his presence, many were greeted like old friends. Baron Karquin had done business with just about everybody.

There seemed small hope of getting close to him, certainly not without causing an altercation and revealing their authority. Already, from the wary behaviour of officials at the smaller moots, Thonius had realised the folk of the Western Banks did not take well to Imperial dealings. It was a free market, which depended on the good will of the rogue traders. The authority of the Throne was not welcome.

Kys tried to bribe a junior ledger-keeper for information, but it hadn't worked. The baron had great power here, particularly during the time of the moot. He wielded Imperial authority by proxy. During a moot, a slaughter-baron had more power in his town than the lord governor sub-sector.

Karquin's face was craggy, and his frame big, made bigger by the weight of velvet, chainmail and hides. His teeth were bad, his eyes hooded. On his

head, he wore a circle-crown of bronze mounted with two polished ram's horns, an ancient badge of office. The crown was mostly lost in his unruly black hair, so it appeared the horns sprouted from Karquin's own brow. He had four of his many bodyguards by his side at all times. They were big men, dressed in the high-button coats of the slaughterman guild, but their chainblades were designed for combat, not rendering. They wore bleached antlered beast-skulls on their leather caps. The bodyguards saw to it that none but the most important clients got close to the baron.

'We're screwed at this rate,' said Madsen. Thonius didn't think he'd ever met anyone so pessimistic.

'Let's press the issue,' suggested Kys.

'And get in a fight?' Thonius said.

Kys shrugged. Ahenobarb, just a big shape in the firelight, seemed to approve.

'There are ways!' Kinsky said sarcastically. He glanced at Ahenobarb and immediately the big man reached out to catch Kinsky as he fell.

'What's he doing?' Thonius hissed.

Kys took a couple of rapid steps backwards and covered her mouth in shock. The raw, unleashed surge of psi-power had taken her off-balance.

'Shit!' she gasped. 'He's gone... left his body...'

'What?' Thonius said.

Kys pointed through the bustling crowd towards the great gaggle of people collected around Karquin on the baronial dais at the end of the hall.

'I can feel him... hunting...' Kys said.

'Get him back here!' Thonius said to Ahenobarb.

'Kinsky knows what he's doing,' Madsen said stonily. 'If we leave this up to you, we'll be here all week.'

'This is the inquisitor's operation,' Thonius growled. 'You three are here under sufferance.'

'Whatever,' said Madsen and looked back into the crowd. Thonius stared too, but he could see nothing out of the ordinary. What was Kinsky doing?

‘That ledger keeper, just behind Karquin, on the left,’ whispered Kys.

Thonius found the man. Pale, old, wearing long, lime-caked robes and a necklace of bulls’ teeth. The old man had turned from a trencher of food and was leafing through the tanned skin pages of one of the massive ledger books. Each volume took two men to carry. They sat on ivory stands around the baron’s dais. The ledger keeper speed-read each page he turned with blank eyes.

Abruptly, the ledger keeper backed away from the volume, blinking and disorientated. Kinsky lurched and opened his eyes.

‘They’re not here, but they were expected,’ he said.

‘What?’ asked Thonius.

‘Captain Thekla of the *Oktober Country* is a regular visitor to this moot. The baron had prepared accommodation for him, and reserved several herd parcels that he believed Thekla would be interested in.’

‘So we are wasting our time here...’ Kys began.

Kinsky grinned at her. ‘There is an interesting part to this. According to the records, the baron knew Thekla wasn’t coming this season, because Thekla’s apologies and regrets were passed on to the baron this morning by a stock trader called Bartol Siskind.’

‘Who is?’

‘Master of the rogue trader *Allure*, and currently in the auction pens, bidding for flange-horn.’

THEY SPREAD OUT into the crowds and the firelit night. Moving into the shadows of a doorway, Thonius touched his wraithbone pendant and made contact.

‘The *Oktober Country* isn’t here and it isn’t coming, but we’ve got a lead on another shipmaster it may have had recent dealings with.’

+Details?+ Ravenor replied.

‘Bartol Siskind, of the *Allure*. Kinsky got the information out of a local mind.’

+I felt it from here. We will be asking Mr Kinsky to be more circumspect. He is powerful, but also crude. An incident here would be regrettable.+

‘Indeed,’ said Thonius. He glanced round. A couple of ragged drovers had just gone by, glaring maliciously at the off-worlder in the shadows talking to himself. ‘I’d better go. We’re going to see what we can get out of this Siskind once we find him. You’d better recall Harlon and Kara to the ship.’

+I will. Be careful, Carl.+

Thonius made his way through the crowd. Despite the gale off the sea, the night was warm. Four hundred thousand head of stock generated a significant amount of heat.

And smell. Already Thonius’s favourite buckle-back boots were ruined from the dung swilling the streets. He wafted his kerchief in front of his nose.

Staccato shouts echoed from the vast bowls of the auction arenas. Bidding was in progress. Confident, experienced-looking shipmen in winter coats, cloaks or body armour leaned at the bone rail and held up numbered cards as a dozen of the hugest quadrupeds Carl Thonius had ever had the misfortune to smell were circled in the paddock below.

But there was another source of commotion, above the chatter of the crowd. It was coming from behind him, back from the direction of the baron’s pavilion.

Casually, Thonius took up a place on the nearest arena’s overstage. The man next to him was a brawny red-head in a bodyglove and heavy cloak.

‘What’s that about, do you suppose?’ Thonius asked idly, nodding back in the direction of the pavilion.

The shipman scowled. ‘Some frigger brought a psyker. Got into the head of one of the baron’s people. Karquin’s gone frigging nuts, so the whole moot’s gonna slow right down until the fuss dies away,’ The man swore again. ‘I’m meant to be in Caxton in eight days with a hold full of sirloin,’ he complained.

‘A psyker,’ said Thonius. ‘That’s not good.’

‘Of course it’s not good!’ the shipman blustered. ‘Everyone knows they’re banned from the moots! Moot-law. No psykers, on account of unfair trading. Always been that way. That’s why the baron’s got his warlock.’

Of course, that’s why the baron’s got his warlock, Thonius thought. Of course, of *course*, and *everyone* knows that psykers are banned from the moot by ancient decree. Of course they do. Of frigging *course*.

He could hear Kys saying it. *The stuff you know*.

Well, it turns out *this* wasn’t one of them. Come to that, he hadn’t even seen a warlock.

‘What the hell have you done?’ the shipman asked him suddenly. Thonius started. Was the look of dismay on his face that obvious?

But that’s not what the shipman had meant. He looked down, over the ivory rail, into the street. One of the baron’s bodyguards was down there, chainblade in hand. Two ragged drovers were busy pointing out the man they’d seen talking to himself.

‘Oh shit,’ said Thonius.

TRIPLE SHUTTERS SECURED the holding cell. I waited as they opened in series. Vertical doors, then horizontal barriers, then an inner skin of verticals again, all sliding back into the recesses of the armoured frame. Then I moved through into the dingy cell.

Duboe looked up at the light and at me and groaned. He was tethered to the floor by a long chain that was fixed to his bracelet cuffs. The chain had enough length on it to allow him to lie on the straw pallet in the corner or use the chemical toilet. He was dirty and unshaven. A tray lay by the door, a half-eaten meal on it.

‘You again,’ he said.

Me again. Get used to it, I thought. But for the information he might yet yield, most inquisitors I knew would have had Duboe executed by now. He was criminal scum, exploiting the systems of Imperial society just to corrupt it.

He was also a strange one. He had no discernible mind-talents, but parts of his brain were unreadable. I had interviewed him a dozen times in the six days since we'd set out from Eustis. His mind had become ever more impenetrable. It also seemed as if he had been getting stupider.

‘What do you want me to confess to now?’ he asked, getting up on his knees.

I made no response.

Duboe stood up, tired but somehow triumphant. ‘Okay,’ he slurred, ‘okay... I admit it. I’m Horus, reincarnated. I am the arch-enemy of the Golden Throne. I am—’

+Shut up.+

He fell silent and stared at the floor. To begin with, cavae-master Duboe had been quite forthcoming. He had owned up to his part in the narcotic trade, explained how he had abused his position as an importer to circulate contraband into the subculture of Petropolis. During our second interview, he had been quite forthcoming on the subject of his sources. A number of rogue traders who had dealings with the Imperial Pits supplied him with prohibited substances along with pit-beasts. The *Widdershins* secured him obscura and gladstones at a decent rate. The *Fontaineblue* brought in grinweed and yellodes. The *Macrocosmae* had been good for both. Duboe had been perfectly placed to distribute, thanks to his connections with the moody clans and the gamesters. I had already passed all three names on to my masters in the Ordos Helican. Others could deal with it.

It had taken longer to fox the *Oktober Country* out of him. That was where the flects were coming in from. Duboe finally sold out his contact, Feaver Skoh, and the complicity of the *Oktober Country*’s master, Thekla. But he insisted he didn’t know where Skoh and Thekla were getting the flects from. That was where the mind-wall went up.

I probed him for a moment. For the third or fourth time, all I got was a mysterious memory-echo... ‘Contract thirteen’.

+Tell me about the *Allure*.+

He winced. ‘The what?’

+The *Allure*.+

He shrugged. 'It's a ship. It does the Lenk run. It's brought me beasts a few times.'

Hovering, I circled around him slowly. 'Its captain... a friend of Skoh's?'

'No.'

+Thekla, then?+

A shrug. 'Yeah, Thekla. Old ties. Trader bonds. All buddies together. They're allies. That's how rogue traders work.'

+Did the master of the *Allure* ever supply you with flects?+

'Siskind? No?'

+Did the master of the *Allure* ever offer to supply you with flects?+

'No.'

I stabbed a mind-lance into Duboe's mid-brain and he swayed, in pain. It was like pushing a sword into wet paper. His mind seemed so... mushy.

+What else can you tell me about Siskind and the *Allure*?+

Duboe rocked. 'Siskind is Thekla's third cousin. They're both related by blood to Lilean Chase.'

I was momentarily stunned. Lilean Chase had been an abominable blight on the Imperium eighty years before. A radical of the Recongregator philosophy, she had forgone her ordo loyalties and founded the Cognitae school on Hesperus. There, for three generations, she had hard-schooled the brightest and best that had fallen into her clutches and formed them into sociopathic monsters, driven by a will to undermine the fabric of the holy Imperium. The Cognitae had only come to an end thanks to a purging raid led by Lord Inquisitor Rorken, now Grand Master of the Ordos Helican. Damn! Molotch himself had been a product of that deranged academy!

I became aware that my contact alarm was piping. I retreated from the cell and keyed the hatches to shut after me.

Medicae Zarjaran was waiting for me outside.

'What's the trouble?' I asked him.

‘I’m concerned, sir, only for the prisoner’s welfare,’ he said.

‘And so?’

‘Duboe’s mind is fraying,’ he said. ‘He is dying. I’m afraid it’s because of the repeated interrogations.’

‘Medicae, I’ve gone easy on him. A dozen interviews, no more than that.’

‘I understand, but when Mr Kinsky’s sessions are added in—’

+Mr Kinsky’s sessions?+

I had forgotten myself. My frank mind-clause had quailed him. The short, olive-skinned medicae cowered back from me.

‘My apologies,’ I said. ‘Please confirm... Kinsky has been interviewing the prisoner too?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Zarjaran timidly. ‘He and Mamzel Madsen, twice a day.’

What the hell was this? I turned my chair automatically to roam up to the bridge and demand answers out of Preest. But Halstrom was standing directly behind me.

+Yes?+

‘My lord inquisitor. I summoned you out of your interview. There’s a... situation... down on the surface...’

PATIENCE KYS SHOULDERED her way through the massing crowds, thankful of the camouflaging flicker of the firelight, looking back and forth for Thonius.

+This is bad,+ she sent, but instead of Ravenor’s voice she got the gruff mind-drawl of Kinsky.

+Yeah, it’s bad. Get your ass in gear. We’re leaving.+

+Where are you?+

+The ride. Get a move on.+

Gongs and what sounded like kettle drums were sounding out now from various parts of the torchlit town. The noise caused a stir, an agitation in the already unsettled moot crowds.

Everywhere she looked, slaughtermen were moving through the throng. The baron's bodyguards, their strength supplemented by regular meat-cutters from the rendering silos.

+Carl? Where are you?+

No response. She repeated the query using her pocketvox. Still nothing. She hurried down Tusk Verge's busy main street in the direction of the highway viaduct. Overhead, the night sky was underlit amber by the smoke and canfires of the town. A large, slender, sickle moon hung high in the west. A slaughterman's moon, it was called, announcing moot-time because it resembled both a butcher's stripping blade and a long ivory tusk.

Carl had told her that. The stuff he knew.

The drumming became more incessant. Then she heard a fierce, rasping *whoosh*. She looked round.

A blood-red full moon seemed to be rising above the town, rising fast. But it wasn't a celestial body at all. It was a globe balloon, trapped in a thick woven net that stretched down beneath its spherical bulk to suspend an ivory basket. The rasping, whooshing sounds came from the brief, bright squirts of flame from the burner as it rose. The basket trailed a cable down to the ground. There was a man in the basket, a dynast drover by the look of him. His body was caked in white clay except for dark kohl rings around his eyes, and he wore a headdress of antlers. He had a bone rattle in each hand, and he shook them and pointed them down into the crowd.

Kys had seen this man before, in the barter-hall. The baron's warlock, his shaman. Evidently a psyker himself – Kys could feel her flesh goosebump – he had gone aloft to locate the interloper. The balloon rose no higher than ten metres. Its tether was fixed to a cart that the baronial bodyguards were wheeling through the streets to move their warlock bloodhound around.

Kys started to run. She reached the rockcrete yard where they had left the half-track. The three Petropolitan agents were already aboard, and Madsen

had the engine running.

‘Come on!’ Kinsky called.

‘Where’s Thonius?’ she asked.

Kinsky shrugged. ‘Like I give a damn. We’ve got to leave town now before things get ugly.’

‘We’re not leaving him behind!’ Kys said.

‘You want to take the whole frigging place on?’ Madsen called. ‘Look, I don’t like leaving a body on the ground either, but frankly, sister, better him than all of us. The baron will have us ritually shredded if he gets hold of us. Shit, Thonius is probably already dead. Where will your precious inquisitor’s mission be if we all end up as dog-mince?’

‘Are you frigging well gonna get aboard or not?’ Kinsky asked.

‘No,’ said Kys. ‘And if you drive out of here now, next time I see you, I’ll kill the lot of you.’

Ahenobarb laughed. Madsen threw the half-track into gear. ‘You stay here, Kys, and there won’t be any next time.’

Kys stepped back as the vehicle lurched forward. It pulled a wide turn and then thundered away across the torchlit viaduct.

Kys watched it go and then turned back into the town.

THONIUS STARTED TO run. He could see the balloon and the ghastly capering freak in its basket. More importantly, he could hear the shouts and cries in the crowd behind him as the slaughterman bodyguard pushed his way through to reach him.

His heart was pounding. This wasn’t fair. It just wasn’t fair. He didn’t deserve this.

He knew running was making him stand out. He might as well have been holding up a sign saying, ‘Here I am, the guilty one’. But still he ran. The bodyguard had got a good look at him. All he could see in his mind’s eye were the polished teeth of the man’s chainblade.

Most people got out of his way. Nobody wanted a piece of this trouble. A few, tally-men and stock-men mostly, cried out and pointed, alerting his

pursuers.

There was a junction ahead. Straight on was the bustling main street, to the right a short drystone alley that led to a staircase down into the moot pens. He kept going straight. If he could get to the street, then he could reach the yard, reach the vehicle. They'd be waiting for him. With the engine running.

Hands grabbed at him. Three filthy drovers had decided they weren't just going to stand by and watch some outsider get away with breaking their most inviolable laws. Shouting out, they clawed at his coat. One had his left arm pinned.

'Get off me!' he wailed. One thumped him across the side of the head to shut him up. The drover had bone rings on his dirty fingers and the hard edges stung and drew blood. Thonius could feel it dribbling down the side of his face.

Carl Thonius hated physical combat. He didn't look like much of a threat either. He appeared too fragile, too slight, especially compared to combat specialists like Nayl and Zeph Mathuin. Certainly, he saw himself more as a thinker, a tactician. He tended to leave what he called 'the fisticuffs' to his more brawny comrades. But, in truth, Carl Thonius was a trained Throne agent, an ordo interrogator. The fact that Harlon Nayl could kill him with a single cough obscured the fact that Thonius was still far far more capable than the average man on the street. This street included, it was to be hoped.

The drovers holding him were whip-thin and strong. The pursuing bodyguard could only be a few paces off now. Thonius was not physically powerful, but he fought with a canny combination of brains and vicious dexterity. He went limp, and his assailants relaxed slightly, assuming him to be submitting to their efforts.

It was easy, therefore, to snap himself sideways, freeing his pinned arm. He back-kicked the drover behind him in the shins and jabbed his fingers into the eyes of the dynast breathing rancid halitosis in his face. The man screamed. Thonius danced away, ducked a flying fist from the third drover,

and pirouetted neatly to kick him in the gut. Two were down – one doubled over and retching, the other on his knees, hands clamped over his injured eyes. The third came in, roaring hoarsely, slashing with an ivory dagger. Thonius dodged to the man's right, caught his stabbing wrist with his left hand and broke the drover's humerus against his right forearm with a scissoring block-and-yank.

Some of the off-world traders in the immediate vicinity cheered. They didn't care about the outcome. A decent street fight was an entertainment to be enjoyed.

There was a revving sound, the noise of a chainblade kicking into life. In his high-buttoned black coat, the pursuing bodyguard stormed into view, his powered, ceremonial weapon whining as it swung and circled in expert hands.

Thonius jumped backwards and the alarmed crowd retreated wide to avoid the oscillating chainblade.

Thonius could hear the warlock-freak up in his basket, shaking his rattles fit to bust, screaming that the rogue was found.

The bodyguard came in, blade shrilling. Thonius feinted left and then went right, pausing to rip the antlered headdress off one of the fallen drovers as he did so. As the bodyguard came round for a second try, hefting his cumbersome weapon, Thonius had the antlers held out before him with both hands, like the beast-tamers he'd seen in the circus, warding off big felids with the legs of a stool.

The bodyguard chopped with his chainblade, and fifty centimetres of brittle antler tree sheared away in splinters. The force nearly tore the headdress out of Thonius's hands. Another pass, and now both antlers were cut down. A drunken shipman in the circle of onlookers cheered and clapped, and the bodyguard glanced around with a murderous glare.

Thonius took the opportunity as it was given. He lunged forward and stabbed the sawn-off anders deep into the slaughterman's neck.

It was horrible and messy. Blood squirted out and drizzled the crowd, which backed away sharply with disgusted complaints. The slaughterman

fell on his front, his limbs convulsing. He landed across his own tearing chainblade and a great deal more blood erupted into the air.

All the rough good humour was gone now. No more clapping, no more cheering. This wasn't bare-knuckle chop and punch. A man was dead.

Thonius threw the dripping headdress aside. He started on towards the main street.

But now there were three more slaughtermen running up towards him from that direction. One had a chain-blade, another a butcher's axe. The third was wielding a long, bronze-bladed drover lance.

For a brief moment, Thonius considered reaching into his left hand coat pocket and pulling out his ordo rosette. He pictured himself holding it up and declaring: 'By the order of the Imperial and Holy Inquisition, and by the authority of the Ordo Xenos Helican and Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor, I command you to desist and submit.'

Would that stop a lance and an axe and a chainer? Would the sworn and blooded moot-kin of an august and almost deified slaughterbaron even recognise the authority?

Thonius decided the answer was no. He had no desire to end his career with a raised rosette in one hand, a meaningless declaration on his oh so pretty lips and a bronze lance through his torso.

So he reached into his right hand coat pocket instead. All bets were off now.

Will Tallowhand, God-Emperor rest his soul, had given Carl Thonius the Hecuter 6 the day Thonius had achieved the rank of interrogator. Kara Swole had given him a not entirely unpleasant hug, and Norah Santjack had presented him with a silver charm showing Saint Kiodrus inspiring the hosts. Nayl had given him a pat on the arm and a few inspiring words, and Ravenor had given him a first edition of Solon's writings.

The book was on a shelf in his cabin aboard the *Hinterlight*. He still wore the charm. Nayl's comradely pat and heroic words, and Kara's hug, were cherished memories with zero practical application.

On balance, right then, in that dusty side street, Tallowhand's gift seemed the most lasting and provident.

Will had warned him the Six had a beefy kick. Thonius knew it. He'd trained with the gun on the *Hinterlight's* range, exhausting hundreds of clips for ten-zero groupings. This was the first time, in anger.

The Hecuter 6 was a hand-made piece. The body and slide were brushed chrome, the grip satinized black rubber machined out to fit his hand. It formed an inverted 'L' shape because the grip housing, built to contain an eighteen round clip, was longer than the polished body. The safety-off was a steel rocker that the thumb depressed automatically when the weapon was gripped. When it discharged, white flame burped from the snout and the slide banged back and forth, flinging out the spent case with a chime like loose change. The buck-recoil wrenched his wrist. It was so frigging loud. Thonius realised that he'd only ever shot it with ear-protectors on.

The crowd broke and fled. The slaughterman with the lance jerked back four or five metres, his face missing. The man with the chainblade did likewise, tumbling over on the cobbles. The axe man turned to flee. It was all too easy to put a round through the back of his head. Such force. Such monumental destroying force. The axe man spun over, his face hitting the paving first with a wet crunch.

Thonius gasped, and raised the Hecuter to a ready/armed position. His wrist ached. His mind was racing. He heard someone growl a curse, and saw one of the retreating shipmen turn, wrenching an eight-shot heavy revolver from his ermine-edged coat. Yes, all bets were off.

Thonius didn't wait. He put a bullet through the shipman too.

KYS, ALREADY RUNNING, jumped when she heard gunfire echo down the streetway. It was distant, muffled. A street away? Two? More? All around her, the moot crowd was breaking and scattering, fleeing the killing zone. Drovers and moot-men ran, panicking. Shipmen and off-world traders were more leisurely, returning to their vehicles, heading back to their ships

on the commerce fields. Some had weapons drawn just in case, and the richest had their lifeguard cadres locked and loaded.

The Tusk Verge moot was certainly suspended. There was evidently going to be hell to pay for the disruption.

As she ran, against the tide, Kys could see the warlock in his balloon, heading towards the auction rings and the gates into the pens. She didn't dare risk telepathy now.

'Carl! In the name of the God-Emperor, Thonius! Where are you?'

No response. She halted under the eaves of a barter-hall and self-tested her vox. It was live, all right.

'Carl?'

'KYS? YOU OUT there? I need a hand, I really do!' Thonius called. He was running down the stinking stone stairs into the unlit pens. Above and behind him the street was alive with tumult and firebrands.

He stopped for a moment in the shadow of a drystone wall and reached into his coat for his microbead, tracing the tiny plastek-sheathed wires from his earpiece to the compact set in his pocket. The wires had been torn out, presumably when the drovers had manhandled him.

His heart was still beating fast. He checked his weapon. The tiny LED display informed him he still had fourteen rounds left. And he had another clip in his hip pocket.

The smell and the darkness had become alarming. There was no light down in the pen yards. Just stink. Massive, heavy bodies jostled in the stalls. He was splashing through pools of urine, tripping on raked-up rafts of straw, mud, shit.

'I really frigging want to know the way out of here,' he said.

+Relax, Carl. It'll be all right.+

Thonius smiled as Ravenor's voice floated into his head. He could feel the warm glow off his wraithbone pendant.

A bobbling line of torches was making its way down into the pen yards in the dark. They were coming after him. Thonius could hear shouting voices,

gunning chain-blades.

‘Help?’ he said.

+Ahead twenty paces.+

‘Right.’ He obeyed. It brought him up against a solid iron gate.+Open the gate.+

‘What?’

+Open the gate, Carl.+

‘You expect me to go into a pen full of frigging tuskers?’

+Sigh. Actually, they’re demi-pachyderms. Quite placid, despite their size.+

‘I know as a fact the average demi-pach on this scum-world weighs in at forty tonnes and has shovel-tusks the size of an ork’s bill-hook.’

+Indeed. Carl, you asked for my help and I’m trying. As I sense it, there are sixty-eight of the baron’s slaughtermen coming down the pen track towards you, out for blood. I’m not even counting the angry drover-men with them, or the armed traders coming along for the bounty. I’ll pacify the demi-pachs. Just get across the yard.+

Carl Thonius sighed and slid back the gate bolt. The sound of it made the herd inside sound and low. Huge hooves trampled forward. ‘I—’

+Get the hell on with it, Carl.+

Thonius pushed the hefty gate open and slid into the pen. He leaned the gate shut behind him. The demi-pachs were huge shadows in the chilly night. He could smell their weight, their dung. He could see their snorting breath fuming the cold air.+Carl? Let’s go.+ He walked forward.

Terra, these things were big. Even in the utter dark, they were monsters. They loomed over him. He could sense their parasite-clotted, wrinkled hides. He edged past two or three, then one turned its massive head and he had to duck to avoid collision with a pair of two-metre tusks.

‘I’m dead,’ he whispered.

+Shut up, Carl. I’m trying to save you here. Keep going. Another twenty paces.+

‘Eu[www...](#)’

+What?+

‘One of these things just defecated on me.’

+It’ll wash off, Carl. Come on. Get with me.+

‘I see the gate.’

+Good. Head for it. Open it.+

Head low, Thonius scurried through the forest of legs and distended bellies, hearing their multi-stomach gurgle, smelling their constant gas.

He reached the far gate and drew back the slider bolt.

+Wait—+

Thonius didn’t. His heart was fluttering with fear now. He so wanted to be out of the pen, away from the gigantic beasts.

+Carl, I—+

Thonius pulled the gate open and dashed out into the drystone corridor outside. He only dimly registered the figures in front of him.

He raised his gun as fast as he was able.

The slaughterman’s face was fixed in a grimace, marked with dried blood. The chainblade sang.

The toothed cutter severed Thonius’s right arm at the elbow. His whole forearm, the hand still clutching the Hecuter 6, flew off into the dark.

KYS HEARD THE scream of pain and outrage. ‘Carl! By all that’s holy, Carl!’

HE’D NEVER BEEN worn. There’d never been a circumstance where it might have to happen. Ravenor didn’t even know if Carl Thonius could be worn.

But there was no choice.

The wraithbone pendant shone like fire.

NFFF! PAIN! EXCRUCIATING, dominating... total. I try to blank it, but it’s overwhelming. Blood’s pumping out of my severed arm. I’ve fallen down, I’m passing out.

There's a slaughterman standing over me, his murderous chain blade raised, gore flecking from the cycling teeth.

Focus. *Focus!*

This... this is a surprisingly soft place. Warm, inviting, educated, refined. Thonius's mindspace is like a gentleman's club. No, a private dinner party. Every place setting perfect, every line of discourse wise and ironic. God-Emperor, it's so genteel, so polished.

Except for that man at the end of the dining table. The man with the severed arm, spraying blood all over the pressed white table cloth, screaming, soiling himself. I raise a crystal glass, dignified, and toast. I am the host here. I'm in charge.

The man with the shorn-away arm stops screaming. He looks at me, puzzled, like I'm some gate-crasher.

We look into each others eyes for a moment. There's a door behind him in the wood-panelled wall, A door into a secret room. The man really, really doesn't want me to go in there. I don't. There's no time. A brute with a chainblade is about to decapitate me.

CARL THONIUS'S MUTILATED body springs up onto its feet and avoids the downstroke of the chainblade. It circles wide and kicks the chainblade's operator in the face so hard several of his teeth come flying out.

Then there's a man with a knife. Even missing a limb, Thonius's body disarms him easily and leaves the knife wedged under his left eye.

The other two men have lances. Herd lances, with long, broad, bronze tips.

Thonius's body reaches down into the filth and prises the Hecuter 6 from the dead fingers of a severed right arm.

Left-handed, it raises the gun. The grip doesn't fit its hand.

Who cares?

A tight squeeze puts it on auto. The charging spearmen come apart like gristle dolls.

Only then do I sink to my borrowed knees, drop the gun and sag. I've staved off the effects of Thonius's blood loss long enough.

Kys is there. She smiles down at me.

She says 'Gonna be fine. I'll get you out of here.'

And she means it.



THREE

WHEN HE WOKE up, he was flat on his back, with three hard, white suns shining into his eyes, and a tall figure standing over him. The figure was a shadow, silhouetted by the clustered suns.

Although he knew Ravenor could never be a figure, an upright figure, not any more, he was sure that was who it was. It was big and strong, and it was assured. Perhaps this was some lingering part of the strange things that had been done to his mind.

The figure reached up a hand and, with a casual, godlike gesture, swung the suns aside in the sky.

With their light tipped away, he realised they were not suns after all. Just a bank of chrome-hooded photo-lumin surgical lamps on a multi-poise armature. And the figure wasn't Ravenor. Or the God-Emperor.

It was Zeph Mathuin.

The bodyguard was naked except for a pair of white, draw-string shorts and a heavy packing of surgical dressings strapped across his broad torso. Thonius could see the entirety of Mathuin's left arm; the polished mechanisms of a chrome-plated augmetic limb. He could see the old scars where silver metal and caramel flesh folded into one another at the shoulder. He thought of his own arm and—

The stuff you know.

'He's awake,' Mathuin said, and turned away. Ravenor hovered his chair across the infirmary to Thonius's bedside. 'Carl?'

Zarjaran, the medicae, appeared from somewhere and checked the diagnostic displays above the head of the cot. 'My head hurts,' Thonius said, his voice sounding to him like it was coming out of distant speakers. 'Naturally,' said Zarjaran. 'I want to sit up.'

Zarjaran reached up to a dangling control box and elevated Thonius's cot into a half recline.

Thonius looked around the room. He'd never been a patient in the *Hinterlight's* infirmary before, except for periodic health checks and shots prior to planet visits. Ravenor was there in front of him, his armoured shell giving nothing away. Mathuin had crossed back to his own rumpled cot and was sitting on its edge, sucking drink from a flask through a plastek straw. There was an overwhelming smell of counterseptic wash. 'I'm sorry,' Thonius said. 'For what?' Ravenor asked. 'The mess.' 'Things happen in the field, Carl. I'm just glad you're alive.'

Thonius felt as if he might burst into tears. He breathed hard, and felt the tension pull at sutures. He didn't dare look down at his right arm. He wanted Ravenor to mind-speak, so he could hear his real voice and tone and inflection, instead of that bloodless, emotionless voxsponder. But he didn't know if his splitting, psi-abused mind could take it.

'You and Kys got me out.'

'We did,' said Ravenor. 'I'm sorry I had to ware you like that. I would normally ask permission of a friend first, and I don't like to ware someone who's not experienced it before. But it was a necessity.'

'It was peculiar,' said Thonius. In truth, he could remember little about it. The memory of pain eclipsed just about everything else. But he had a feeling of being stretched from within, hollowed out. He was exhausted.

'I'm exhausted too,' Ravenor said. 'It saps me, especially over such a distance. And... in such traumatic circumstances.'

Thonius swallowed. 'My arm. Where... where is my arm?'

'Back where it should be,' said Zarjaran.

Thonius looked down at himself for the first time. His entire right arm was swathed in dressings, with many drug-shunt tubes and wound-drains curling out of it. But they were his fingers protruding from the binding gauze.

'We were able to re-attach it...' the medicae began.

‘Doctor Zarjaran is being modest,’ said Ravenor. ‘He spent sixteen hours on you with micro-servitors.’

Zarjaran bowed his head slightly.

‘It’s early days, interrogator,’ he said. ‘But I think the regraft is taking. You might have some long-term loss of function, but the injury was surprisingly clean.’

‘Be thankful,’ Mathuin growled, ‘that the men of the Slaughter Guild take pride in keeping their blades astonishingly sharp.’

Thonius tried to flex his fingers, but he could not.

Then he looked up. ‘Sixteen hours, you said. How long have I been out?’

‘Two days,’ said Ravenor.

‘What have I missed?’

‘Little. Nayl and Kara are on the surface, looking for Siskind. I withdrew everyone else. Everyone who might have been connected to the incident.’

‘What about... Kinsky and his friends?’

‘I’ve yet to talk to them,’ said Ravenor.

‘He’s making them sweat,’ said Mathuin.

SOMEONE WAS CRYING. Zael could hear the sobbing sound echoing up through the hab-stack. It was still dark, early. He got out of his little cot into the pre-dawn chill and crept out of the backroom he shared with his sister. Nove’s bed was empty. She hadn’t been back that night.

Granna was asleep in the family room, snoring a phlegmy snore. Zael could smell the sharp stink of glue. There was a light on, a single glow-globe over the cupboard. It illuminated the little effigy of the God-Emperor that granna kept there.

The sobbing wasn’t granna either, though it had been on many nights. It was coming from outside. The stack landing. Zael padded forward, through the kitchen to the door. Through the frosted glass, he could see a figure pressed against the door, head bowed. He could hear the ragged sobbing now. He could even see how each sob gusted brief condensation over the other side of the glass. ‘Nove?’

The crying continued. 'Sis? Is that you?' More sobs.

'Nove? What's happened?'

The crying ebbed. A bare hand splayed flat against the glass, pressed tight, imploring.

'Nove? You're scaring me...'

The door handle turned slowly and released. It did it again. Zael saw the dead bolt was thrown.

Let me in...

'Nove? Answer me. Is it you?'

Let me in, Zael...

Zael remembered the stories going round the stack. Raiders, in the night, knocking up poor families, breaking in...

There was nothing to steal here. But, the stories said, the raiders didn't just want to steal...

'Nove?'

Zael... let me in...

'You're not my sister,' Zael said, backing away. He looked around for a weapon. There was a blunt paring knife on the sink-edge. He grabbed it.

Something to tell you...

'What?'

Something he needs to know...

'Who?'

Let me in... he must know...

'Go away!'

The handle turned again. Then the nurl of the dead bolt began to rattle to and fro.

'Go away!'

The dead bolt began to slide back.

'Go away!' Zael yelled. 'Granna! Come quick! Granna!'

But... oh, now, that was right. His granna was dead.

And this was all... all...

The bolt slunked back and the door began to open.

Zael shrieked.

KYS SLAPPED HIS cheek hard and he fell onto the metal deck. 'What the hell's the matter with you, boy?' she said.

Zael looked up at her, blinking. He was in the corridor. The door to his cabin was open behind him, and he'd dragged most of his bed-roll cover out into the hallway after him.

'I...' he began.

'I was asleep, and I heard you screaming,' Kys said harshly. Then she sighed, and crouched down beside him. 'I'm sorry. I didn't want to hit you. I didn't know what else to do.' 'I...' he said again. 'I had a bad dream.'

'Right.'

Involuntarily, Zael wrapped his arms tight around Kys. She flinched and went stiff. Slowly, though gently, she pried his arms away from her.

'Look, boy. I'm not a people person.'

'My name is Zael.'

'Yeah, I knew that. Zael,' Kys nodded, though until that moment she'd been struggling to remember the kid's name. 'You had a bad dream. We all do. Damn, you wanna try being psy. Then you get bad dreams you didn't order.'

She became aware he was staring up at her. He looked so young. 'It's fine. Honestly,' she said. 'Wanna tell me about it?'

'It was my sister.'

Throne, Zael, I have sisters. I know how scary that can be.'

'My sister is dead.'

'Oh.'

'She was knocking on my door. She wanted to come in.'

'Right. Real nightmare stuff. I've had shit you—' She stopped and looked at him again. 'You don't want to hear that. You need to sleep. Come on.'

She rose and hoisted him up. 'Pick up your bedding,' she said.

He scooped his bedroll up. She led the way into his cabin. He shrank back when he saw she'd pulled a dagger.

'What's that for—'

'Shhhhh!' she said, a finger to her lips. Warily, she looked under the cot, then threw open the closet, then leapt into the shower room, blade raised.

'Just checking for monsters. None here. It's safe.'

He smiled. 'That was really silly,' he said.

She shrugged and sheathed her blade. 'Frig it, I said I wasn't a people person. Go to bed.'

'Okay.'

'And next time you have a bad dream...'

'Yes?'

'Wake some other bastard, will you?'

'Okay.'

KYS WALKED OUT of Zael's cabin and shut the hatch. She was about to turn away when she paused. She stretched out a long finger and ran the tip of it through the thawing film of frost that surrounded the hatch frame.

She felt the unmistakable buzz of psychic energy.

She walked quickly back to her own cabin and activated the intership vox.

'Ravenor?'

'MAKE IT QUICK. I'm busy,' Ravenor said. He was gliding down the main dorsal corridor of deck three. Kys had to double-time to keep up.

'It's the boy.'

'Zael?'

'Yeah, Zael.'

'What about him?'

'He's borderline psy... maybe nascent. Growing too...'

'I know.'

‘You know?’

‘Patience, why in the name of Terra would I have brought him from Eustis and made him welcome here if I didn’t think he had potential?’

‘Well, I wondered...’

‘The boy was picking my transmissions up on Eustis Majoris. He’s clearly sharp. I want to examine him further, when time permits.’

Kys nodded. ‘But, if he’s sharp... he could be dangerous. Shouldn’t you hand him over to the Black Ships for processing?’

‘No. He’s sharp, but he’s passive sharp. Not active. I can read that much. He’s a reflector. An echoer. I don’t think he’s going to turn into a Kinsky. Or a Ravenor. But I want to know what he’s absorbed. Recorded, if you will. Of all the flect users we traced on Eustis, he was the only psyker.’

‘I think he could be trouble,’ Kys said.

Ravenor swung his bulky chair round to face her. ‘I think so too, Patience. But I’ll decide. It’s my call. He’s here because I say so.’

‘All right.’

‘Now go away,’ Ravenor said.

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m about to speak with the Ministry agents, and I don’t want you to kill them.’

‘Fine,’ she said. And strode away.

THE HATCH HISSED open and Ravenor hovered through. Ahenobarb was sitting at the end of the long conference table, his chin on his arms. Kinsky was leaning back in his seat, flicking nuts from a bag up into his mouth. Lost kernels dotted the floor. Madsen rose as Ravenor entered. ‘This is cooperation?’ she said.+Shut up and sit down.+ Madsen sat down immediately, as if struck.

Kinsky flicked another nut into the air. It missed his mouth. Without looking at Ravenor, he said, ‘Pull another psy play like that, inquisitor, and I will face you down. Do you understand me?’

He flicked another nut. It went up... and then hovered in the air over his open mouth.

‘I believe it’s you who must come to understand the way of things now, Kinsky. You are here to help, not to lead. To advise, not to demand. This is my ship. You are guests. This is my case, you are allies of the Inquisition.’

Ravenor let the nut fall. Kinsky flicked it aside with his hand and got up.

‘Very slick. Very tough. You want to go now? You and me?’

‘Sit down, Kinsky,’ Madsen snapped.

‘You and me, you frigging crip!’

‘Sit down, Kinsky! Now!’ Madsen shouted.

Kinsky sat.

‘Inquisitor,’ Madsen said. ‘I wish to apologise for the actions of my team. Kinsky’s confrontation just then was out of line, but I’m sure you know how volatile it can be with psykers.’

Ravenor stayed silent so Madsen went on.

‘On the surface, our procedures... I understand they sparked a situation. And that resulted in injury to one of your team.’

‘It did.’

‘How is Interrogator Thonius?’

‘Alive. Reunited with his arm.’

Madsen leaned forward. Her eyes were clear and honest. ‘I’m glad. Inquisitor, may I talk with you privately?’

‘Perhaps. Just be happy I didn’t allow agent Kys to attend this meeting. She would have killed all three of you.’

‘She would have tried...’ Ahenobarb chuckled.

Then he froze and reached towards his neck, gagging.

Ravenor released him. ‘She would have succeeded. I have never known anyone as murderous as Patience Kys. You three would be offal by now if I’d let her have her way. Madsen... outside.’

Madsen rose. Swinging round, Ravenor gazed back at Kinsky. ‘You bested me before, Mr Kinsky. Well done. But you were right there and I was at

my range limit from orbit. Do not... not for one moment... expect a rematch to be so easy. I will burn out your mind in an instant.'

'Whatever,' said Kinsky. The nut he had just thrown up turned in mid-air, shivered, and smacked off his cheek with a bulleting force. 'Whatever indeed,' said Ravenor.

WYSTAN FRAUKA WAS waiting for them outside. Madsen shivered as she sealed the door behind them and faced Ravenor. 'Wystan?' Ravenor said politely.

Frauka deactivated his limiter. He plucked a lho-stick from his card pack and lit it, looking bored.

Ravenor faced Madsen. 'No more chances, Mamzel Madsen. You work with me or I ditch you.' 'I understand. Kinsky is a loose cannon and—' 'No, he is not. He is a powerful psyker who should be enclosed in the bosom of the Guild Astropathicus, and not freelanced as a governmental pawn. Ahenobarb is just a minder. You, to me, are the mystery.' 'Me?' she said.

'You, Madsen. You are clearly in charge of this Ministry team. I know why I should be wary of the psyker, and his brute minder. But they answer to you. Therefore you worry me.' 'I assure you—' 'I don't even know your given name.'

'Lusinda Madsen. Happy now?'

'No. Work with me, in all manner of effort, Lusinda Madsen, or I will eject you and your allies into the void.'

She straightened up and faced him. 'You would not dare. I am here by the authority of the lord sub-sector.'

'Yes, you are. I am here by the authority of the Ordos Helican. This far out, on the verges of Lucky Space, who would know... who would care... if I had you three voided from an airgate?'

Lusinda Madsen smiled then. She said, 'I think we understand each other, sir.'

But Ravenor thought... a *smile*. What a strange reaction.

‘THERE HE IS,’ said Nayl. He opened the chipped driver’s door window of the cargo-8 they sat in so they could get a better look across the crowded street.

‘You sure?’ Kara asked.

Nayl nodded. It had taken him a few hours of quiet questions and a roll of never-to-be-seen-again cash to get the skinny on Shipmaster Siskind from the traders in Tusk Verge. Trade custom along the Western Banks was notoriously tight-lipped, as Kys’s team had discovered, and Nayl and Kara had found on their own foray north. The moot-coast prided itself on being just outside rigid Imperial law, and was never happy to be pumped for answers.

But the uproar during the moot had changed that. Ironically, Nayl had benefited from the mess Thonius had been at the centre of. The locals were in mortified disarray, the slaughterbaron had suspended trading. There was unrest and rancour. The off-world traders felt edgy and vulnerable suddenly, not knowing whether to risk waiting until the moot re-opened or to get out while they were still able. What’s more, a shipman had been murdered in the firefight. As a result, the traders were closing ranks, and exchanging protective gossip, tipping one another off to slaughterman guild inspections. Nayl’s questions had seemed just part of that process.

‘That’s Siskind definitely. Red hair, glass jacket, pale tan ATV with red panels on the mudguards.’ ‘He’s rolling,’ said Kara.

Nayl saw it. He turned the cargo-8’s engine over, got a throaty rev or two, and then edged out from the street-side after the tan ATV as it nudged down the thoroughfare through the bustling pedestrians.

The morning was cold and set fair. An emaciated lemon sun ached through the flat grey sky over the shore. There was a strong wind in off the sea. The town of Tusk Verge seemed dismal and bleak, filled up with people who had no wish to be there.

Siskind’s ATV turned east through the town and followed the walled roads up towards the commerce fields. It picked up a little speed as it left

behind the more crowded streetways. 'Not too close,' Kara said. 'Oh, please...'

Still, he idled back, and allowed a trader's articulated cargo-12 and a billowing dung-wagon to get in between their vehicle and the ATV.

The dung-wagon turned off towards the highway viaduct. A few minutes later, the cargo-12 pulled to the right and grumbled down a causeway into the eastern loading docks of the moot pens. Nayl drove on through their dust and followed Siskind's ATV out onto the windswept commerce fields that occupied the high pastures above the moot-town. Here, even during the day, canfires burned, marking out landing plots along with heavy-duty mechanised beacon posts that had been hammered into the dry soil. On almost all of the wide plots sat a freighter, cargo doors agape. Inter-orbit lifters of every size and design were ranged along the commerce field plots, often with small fliers and landers parked next to them. Crews lounged about, bored, smoking, drinking.

Nayl eased back again, as if he was about to turn in to one of the plots. The ATV bellied on ahead, heading up to the north end of the landing field.

They followed, slowly. The tan ATV turned right and slewed to a halt in front of the jaw-doors of an ancient bulk lifter that sprawled across its appointed plot like a wallowing hippo. Its entire rust-riveted bulk was raised from the scorched ground on six vast hydraulic legs.

Nayl pulled them over and they sat and watched. The ATV drove up to the foot of the bulk lifter's ramp and paused, allowing Siskind to jump down. Sunlight flashed on the links of his glass jacket. As he began to converse with the dynast-appointed lander man, the ATV revved again and nosed up into the belly of the lifter. Expressing steam, the vehicle's huge cargo doors began to close.

'He's leaving,' Kara said.

'Let's go,' agreed Nayl.

Nayl killed the engine and they jumped out either side of the truck. Siskind was still arguing with the local plot official. A dispute over landing tariffs, perhaps. Kara and Nayl ran up along the adjacent plot,

keeping a battered old Latimar Ind bulker between them and Siskind's lifter.

It was a long run. Each plot was about three hundred metres long. By the time they had reached the far end of the plot and had turned in and behind Siskind's vessel, it was raising thrusters and sealing for take-off. Siskind, distant now, was turning from the argument with a dismissive shrug and heading for the gangway. He jogged his way up it, and sealed the hatch behind him. The automated gangway retracted into the bulk lifter's flank and heat-shield armour extruded to cover its socket.

The roar of the lifter's power plant rose abruptly by a factor of ten. There was a fierce downrush of jetted air and AG repulsion that Kara and Nayl could feel even from the edge of the plot. It was suddenly like trying to walk into a gale. Dust and dry grass kicked up in a blizzard. The lifter began to rise, arduously, into the air, creating a heat-haze distortion between itself and the soil.

Shielding his face, Nayl raised the heavy-gauge coil-bow he'd been carrying and aimed it up at the ship, into the deluge. Kara shouted something he couldn't hear. He pulled the trigger and fired the bow, feeling the solid kick of the coil-spring. A direct hit impacted on the belly line of the ascending cargo ship. A direct hit that went completely unfelt by the ship's crew.

The bow-shot load had been custom made. A wad of adhesive suspension coating a disk of very special material. Wraithbone.

Siskind's lifter rose into the morning air, nose dipped, gouted black smoke, swung heavily to its left and then turned and began to climb on full down-thrust, its burner-flares blue-white. Rapidly, it became just another dot leaving a contrail in the flat grey sky. Nayl keyed his link. 'Mr Halstrom?' 'Mr Nayl?' the vox contact crackled. 'On your scopes, I trust?' 'Tracking it now.'

THE *ALLURE* BROKE orbit five hours later. It performed a smooth series of mass-velocity transactions and turned out, sliding effortlessly away from

the shoal of anonymous rogue trade ships at high anchor above Flint. To all intents, it was just as anonymous as the rest – none of the trade ships chose to identify themselves electronically. But Halstrom's scopes had followed the bulk lifter to it. It was most certainly the *Allure*.

It powered clear of Flint's gravity trap, bending its course rimward and under the elliptic plane. Cloaked behind extremely non-standard disguise fields, another ship went with it.

The *Allure* was nine astronomical units from Flint and accelerating towards its encoded translation point when its master finally became aware he had a problem.

Bartol Siskind had taken off his jacket of Vitrian glass and hung it over the back of his command seat. The *Allure*'s bridge was capacious but low ceilinged. Much of the flight deck instrumentation extended down from the ceiling over the raked crew stations. Siskind took a sip of caffeine and leaned back to study his master display.

He had already received a signal to go from his enginarium, and his course had been plotted and laid down by his Navigator. All systems were functioning well within parameters, and he was getting a particularly fine output rhythm from the principal drive. He reached up and touched a few runes on the screen, tuning tiny, expert adjustments into the mass-drive regulators.

'Translation point in eleven minutes, accelerating...' the Navigator intoned calmly from the adamite crypt recessed into the deck in front of him. Siskind nodded and turned to Ornales, his first officer, about to order him to stow for warp space.

Ornales sat at the position next to him, his face down-lit by the massive overhead console that arched down over his raked-back seat.

By the light of the dancing green glow, Siskind could see a perplexed expression on his number one's face.

'What?'

'Are you getting that?' Ornales asked.

Frowning, Siskind looked up at his own master display. A new dialogue box had appeared on top of the scrolling system data. It wasn't especially large. It said: *Cut your engines now.*

'What the hell...?' Siskind tried to clear it. It wouldn't cancel. 'Is this a damn joke?'

'It's external,' Ornales replied, his voice tense. His hands were dancing over his mainboard. 'External source. Pict-only communication.'

'But there's nothing in range...!' Siskind said.

He activated the return mode and typed: *Identify?*

The box blinked. *Cut your engines and heave to now.*

Identify now! Siskind wrote angrily.

There was a brief pause. Then the box blinked again and read: *Heave to. Depower and drop to coasting. By order of the Inquisition. Do not make me cripple your ship, Siskind.*

ONCE THE *ALLURE* had coasted down, the outlets of the huge drive assemblies at its stern glowing frosty pink as potential power descaled, the *Hinterlight* made itself visible. The *Allure* was a medium-sized sprint trader of non-standard design, heavily modified during its long life. It was long, craggy and bulky, its only concession to elegance the long chevrons of armour ridging its prow like the steel toe-cap of a pointed boot.

The *Hinterlight* was somewhat smaller and a great deal sleeker, shaped like a blade, with the flared bulk of its drive section at its stern. It flickered menacingly into view, appearing on Siskind's sensor panels a few seconds before it was eye-visible. A combination of xeno-derived technology and Ravenor's own mental strength generated the disguise field. It was a system that Ravenor would be forced to have removed from the *Hinterlight* if his arrangement with Preest wound up.

As it visibly manifested, the *Hinterlight* tracked its primary batteries to target the *Allure*. Preest made damn sure the *Allure*'s systems got a clear indication of multiple target lock. Neither ship was military, neither an

outright fighting vessel, but they were both rogue traders, and where rogue traders went, a decent level of firepower was a professional asset.

Siskind's response, just as obvious, was to make sure his batteries were both depowered and stowed, and his targeting system off-line. It was a clear submissive gesture, an indication of compliance. Even out here, just a few days' voyage from Lucky Space, no one fooled around when the Inquisition called the tune.

An armoured transport shuttle, little more than a gig, dropped down out of the *Hinterlight's* belly hangar, ignited its thrusters in a blaze of blue light, and went flitting across the silent gulf towards the *Allure*. As it approached the other ship, and became dwarfed by its great, battered bulk, guide-path lights began to pulse sequentially along the *Allure's* flank. The gig zipped along after them, tracking in close to the merchantman's scarred hull, and arrived at a hangar dock where the outer hatches and blast curtains were slowly gliding open. The gig paused, adjusted its attitude with a tight burst of point-thrusters, and slid inside.

THE RESEALED HANGAR was thick with swirling exhaust smoke and hydraulic steam. There was a loud, repetitive hazard buzzer sounding, almost drowned out by the huge atmospheric fans under the deck. The echoing buzzer finally cut off and the flashing warning lamps ceased. Overhead floods kicked on and illuminated the gig where it rested on its landing skids in the middle of the primary platform. Several other inter-orbital craft, including the scabby bulk-lifter *Nayl* had tagged, were berthed in lock-cradles off the platform, connected up to ropes of heavyweight fuel and system-fluid lines.

An internal hatch hissed open and Siskind strode out into the vast hangar flanked by three senior members of his crew. They were all armed, and made no effort to disguise the fact. Siskind was wearing his glass-weave jacket, and a bolt pistol hung in a holster at his hip. Two of his comrades were human – a tall, dark-haired man and a shorter, older, balding fellow – both carrying wire-stocked las-carbines. The third was a nekulli, slender and humanoid, but with long spine-scales flowing back from his scalp. The

nekulli's eyes were white slits, his nose virtually absent, his lower jaw thrust forward. Two thin fangs hooked up from this underbite over his top lip. Like all nekulli, he walked with a hunch-shouldered waddle.

The four walked out onto the platform, knee-deep in the repressurisation fog still wreathing the deck, and came to a halt ten metres from the gig.

Siskind cleared his throat. He looked edgy and pissed off.

The cabin hatch on the side of the gig retracted in three, segmented sections. Ravenor's chair hovered out, and sank down to deck level, facing the shipmaster. With a little hiss that made the dark-haired man jump, the chair displayed its hololithic rosette.

'I'm Siskind, master of this vessel,' Siskind said carefully. 'My papers and my letter of marque as an Imperial free trader are in order. If you wish, you may inspect them. Like all true servants of the Throne,' – Siskind stressed that part – 'I have every desire to cooperate and assist the Ordos Officio Inquisitorus. May I enquire... is this a random inspection?'

'No,' replied Ravenor. 'I am Gideon Ravenor, inquisitor, Ordo Xenos Helican. I am hunting a ship called the *Oktober Country*, a ship that I know has had contact with you in the last week.'

Siskind shrugged and chuckled. 'You're after information? That's it? You inconvenience me in the pursuit of my business... for information? Am I accused of any crime?'

'No,' said Ravenor. 'But withholding information from an authorised agent of the Inquisition is a crime, so I advise you to be thoughtful about your next statement.'

Siskind shook his head. He was a handsome man, but there was an unpleasantly cruel set to his features. 'I know the *Oktober Country*. But I've had no contact with it. Not even seen it for, what, three years? There is my information. Now remove yourself from my ship.'

'You are in no position to make demands,' said Ravenor. 'My ship—'

'Will hardly fire on mine with you aboard. I hate to play games, but it was easier to let you aboard. Does the concept of "hostage" mean anything to you?'

‘Oh, absolutely,’ said Ravenor.

‘Shit!’ cried the dark-haired man suddenly. Off to their left, Harlon Nayl stood in the knee-deep fog, a heavy automatic pistol aimed at them in a two-handed grip.

Siskind jumped back. To his right, Kara Swole had an assault cannon on them.

‘And behind you,’ Ravenor added.

All four turned. Mathuin smiled. The barrel-cluster of his rotator cannon cycled menacingly. Siskind and his men had been so intent on Ravenor they’d not even noticed the others slip out under cover of the deck fog from the other side of the gig.

‘I was being polite,’ said Ravenor, ‘but we will play it your way. Harlon?’

Nayl fired a single shot and blew off the balding man’s left kneecap. Hit, the man fell onto the deck, shrieking and writhing.

‘I think that’s established the ground rules,’ Ravenor said. ‘Now let’s get to business.’

I HAD NO desire to waste time. Exposing all of the *Allure*’s secrets would have taken months of painstaking research. It was a big, old ship, its history, manifests and logged records lousy with all manner of dubious deals, illegal transactions and outright crimes. Like any rogue trader, in fact. I’d never seen Preest’s ship-log, and she’d never volunteered it to me. It was the fundamental understanding on which our relationship was based. Rogue traders, even the best of them, tested the limits of Throne Law. Don’t ask and you won’t be disappointed. All I’d required of Preest was she keep her activities clean all the while we were associated.

My worthy, long-departed master, Gregor Eisenhorn, had once told me that if you examine any one man, any group of men, any institution, or any world long enough, you will uncover something untoward. I am proud of the achievements of the Imperium, and the virtues of its society, but I am not naive. There is corruption and crime and heresy everywhere. It is endemic. To operate successfully, an inquisitor must learn to be selective,

to focus on the principal matters of his current case. To do otherwise leads to stagnation and failure.

Thus, I ignored the forty-eight freight tariff evasions the *Allure* had notched up. I ignored the conviction for grievous assault First Officer Ornales had evaded on Caxton. I turned a blind eye to the fact Siskind had a fugitive murderer working amongst his engineering crew, and also to the fact that his ship's surgeon had been disbarred from practice due to gross anatomical misconduct. I passed over the fifteen illegal or prohibited weapons carried aboard the ship, the largest two of which were battery-mounted on the hull. I didn't even care about the consignments of yellodes, gladstones and grinweed we dug out of cavity spaces.

I concentrated on flects, the *Oktober Country*, and on Feaver Skoh and Kizary Thekla.

The *Allure* had a crew of seventy-eight, thirty more than the *Hinterlight*. I examined each one in turn, shaking all kinds of petty crime and misdemeanors out of their heads. Meanwhile, Nayl oversaw the physical sweep of the ship, and Thonius, from his bed in the *Hinterlight*'s infirmary, conducted a data purge of the *Allure*'s systems.

'Sir?'

'Go ahead, Carl.'

'There's virtually nothing in the *Allure*'s files to link it to the *Oktober Country*. A handful of trade meetings. But I have traced an astropathic communiqué received the day after the *Oktober Country* left Eustis Primaris. It's filed and logged, uncoded. From Thekla. It says what we already know... asks Siskind to make his apologies to Baron Karquin.'

'Thank you, Carl. Keep searching.'

'Sir, the message ends with a curious sign off. "Firetide drinks as usual".'

'Repeat that.'

'"Firetide drinks as usual". Mean anything?'

'Sweep our data core for the term "Firetide". It could indicate an event or time when Thekla and Siskind next intended to meet face to face.'

'That's what I thought, sir.'

‘Good work, Carl. How’s the arm?’

‘Still attached to me. Mr Halstrom’s operating keyboard for me.’

‘Keep at it. Thank you, Carl.’

I had taken over Siskind’s ready room for my interrogations. As Thonius signed off, there was a knock at the hatch.

‘Yes?’

Frauka opened the door. He took a lho-stick out of his mouth, exhaled a plume of smoke and said, ‘Ready for Siskind?’

‘Yes, Wystan. Let’s have him.’

I’d saved Bartol Siskind until last, gravely aware of what Duboe had told me under interrogation. Siskind had blood links – remote, admittedly, but still real – to one of the sector’s more infamous heretics. For a while I’d kept telling myself it was just a coincidence. Then I’d thought about it more carefully. It didn’t have to be a coincidence. Though long-aborted, the Cognitae academy and its mentor had enjoyed a profoundly wide influence. The last time I’d checked – about two years earlier – ninety-four cases under prosecution by the Ordos Helican had involved someone or something with Cognitae connections. As secret orders went, it was one of the largest and most pernicious in modern memory. Also, the Cognitae had prided itself on using and recruiting only the very brightest supplicants. It was no low cult, feeding off the poor and the uneducated. Lilean Chase had not only pulled into her influence the Imperium’s finest, she had instigated several eugenic breeding programs that mixed her corrupt but brilliant genes with the bloodlines of the most promising of her students. Her offspring were everywhere, many of them unimpeachable men of high standing. To be a rogue trader, one needed savvy, smarts and panache. Just because Siskind was of her line didn’t automatically mean he was a heretic himself.

Siskind entered the ready room. He looked flustered and unhappy. Frauka had given him a smoke, and he twitched it in his fingers.

‘Sit down,’ I said.

He sat, and had to adjust the setting of the chair. He wasn't used to sitting that side of the captain's desk.

'Bartol Siskind.'

'Inquisitor.'

'I give you notice now that this interview will be conducted mentally. I recommend you relax, or it will be a painful episode to endure.'

He took a drag on his lho-stick and nodded.

+How long have you been master of this vessel?+

The clarity of the first psi-query made him blink. That always happened. No one is ever quite ready for the voice inside your head to be anyone other than yours.

'Fifteen years.'

+Before that?+

'I was first officer on the *Kagemusha*.'

+And how did you come to command the *Allure*?+

Though uncomfortable, he smiled. 'I won it in a card game.'

I verified his truth centres. He wasn't lying.

+How long have you known Kizary Thekla?+

He shifted in his seat. 'Thirty years, give or take. We were juniors together on the *Vainglory* under Master Ensmann. I moved to the *Omadorus* and then the *Kagemusha*, Thekla went to the *Oktober Country* under Master Angwell. When Angwell died, Thekla inherited command.'

+When was that?+

'381. Summer 381. Angwell was old. Four hundred and some. He died of a fever.'

All true so far. Siskind was playing ball. I tried to examine his mind. Curiously, it reminded me of Duboe's. Superficially bright, sharp, fit, but strangely turgid deep down.

+When did you last see Thekla?+

'I told you this. Three years ago, on Flint, at the Winter Great Moot.'

His first lie. It was glaringly obvious. He couldn't hide it.

+When really?+

Siskind sighed. He drew on his lho-stick again, exhaled and looked straight at me. ‘Two months ago. Briefly. On Lenk.’

The truth.

+Describe that meeting.+

He shrugged. ‘I was in a tavern, drinking to the birth of Bombassen’s first son—’

+Bombassen? Your chief engineer?+

‘That’s right. We were rat-arsed. Thekla came in with some of his crew, bought a round to wet the baby’s head. We chatted for a while about old times. Nothing... nothing...’ His voice trailed off. This was more truth, but I was annoyed at the opacity now coating his mind.

+You’re related, you and Thekla?+

Siskind laughed. ‘He’s a distant cousin. But our lineage is all frigged-up. You know that or you wouldn’t be asking this. Our parents’ parents were connected to the Cognitae school raising program. I’m not proud of that. Shit, I’d rather it wasn’t the truth. This isn’t the first time the Inquisition has pulled me over because of things my frigging ancestors did.’

Also true. True as I could see.

+Thekla sent you a communiqué asking you to make apologies for him at the moot.+

‘Yeah. He couldn’t make it. But when you’ve got good contacts with a slaughterbaron, it pays to be civil. He didn’t want to piss Karquin off, so he asked me to smooth things out.’

+Do you know why he couldn’t make the moot?+

‘He didn’t say. I didn’t ask.’

+Do you know why I’m after him?+

Siskind paused. He breathed deeply. ‘Yeah. It’s about flects, isn’t it?’

+It is. What can you tell me about flects, Bartol?+

‘Not much. It’s a suicidal trade. I mean, dealing flects is going to bring trouble down on you eventually, right? He wanted to cut me in, but I said

no. I move a little grin, sometimes I run gladstones. But not flects.'

+You've never dealt in them?+

'No, sir.'

+Never tempted?+

'By the return? Frig, yes! But I knew it would be bad news. Damn, look at this... I'm being mind-probed by the Inquisition for not dealing them. How frigging bad would this be if I was?'

He had a point.

+Where does he get them from?+

'I don't know. Seriously, I don't. You only get to know if you join the cartel.'

+There's a cartel?+

He flinched slightly, causing the long char of ash accumulated on his lho-stick to tumble off onto the polished chrome floor. He knew he'd just let onto something he hadn't realised I didn't know.

+A cartel, Siskind?+

He recovered smoothly. 'Of course there's a cartel, inquisitor. The flect trade doesn't depend entirely on the *Oktober Country*.'

+I never imagined it did.+

'Far as I know, there are about twenty rogue traders who do the run. The source is extra-sub. It's coming from somewhere out in Lucky Space. And before you ask, I have no idea who runs the operation. Or how it's run. Or anything. You buy into it, that's what Thekla told me when he tried to get me in. It's a contract. You get all the details when you buy into the cartel. There's an up-front payment. A deposit. A gesture of good faith.'

+How much?+

He stubbed the lho-stick out. 'Three-quarters of a million.'

+That's a lot.+

'Yeah, right. That's a lot.'

He was still telling the truth, as far as I could chart. But suddenly I saw the real, bald reason he wasn't a part of his distant cousin's flect trade. It

wasn't principle. Siskind couldn't afford it. Three-quarters of a million was beyond his means, and he was resentful about it. The resentment filled his mind in a very readable blur of spiky red.

+What's Firetide?+

He blinked and laughed, about to lie badly. 'I have no idea.'

+Yes, you do. *Firetide drinks as usual...* that's what Thekla said to you.'

Siskind tilted his head back and opened his arms wide. 'You're reading my frigging mind, you bastard! Tell me!'

+Tell me.+

The psychic jab snapped him upright and made tears well in his cruel eyes. 'Okay. O-frigging-kay. Don't do that again.'

+I won't. If you don't provoke me. Tell me about Fire-tide.+

'I want another smoke.' His mind was muddying up again, hardening to my scrutiny. It was peculiar. I felt my interrogation was going well, but still there was a sense he was giving me answers from a free part of his mind while the rest was impenetrable.

'Wystan?' I voxed.

The door-hatch slid open and Frauka came in.

'Lho-stick for Master Siskind,' I said.

Frauka pursed his lips, and plucked the carton out of his jacket pocket. He offered it to Siskind, who took one. Frauka flashed his igniter and lit Siskind's smoke, then lit another for himself.

'Sometimes, I thank the God-Emperor of Mankind for sealed-unit respiratory filters,' I said.

The comment passed Frauka by. 'I'll be outside,' he said, exiting.

The door-hatch slunked shut.

+You've got your smoke,+ I said.+Now tell me about Firetide.+

'It's a festival. On Bonner's Reach.'

+That's out in Lucky Space.+

'Yeah, five days in. From here, two weeks. The last Free Trade station. We used to meet there at Firetide and have a drink or several.'

+Thekla was expecting to meet you there?+

‘Hoping is a better word. We’ve done Firetide every few years. It’s a chance for rogues to catch up, away from Imperial scrutiny.’

+Why was he hoping to see you there?+

‘Just to catch up.’

I paused.+I contend, Siskind, that the message was clearly an instruction for you to meet him there.+

‘Think what you like.’

+He was telling you to come there, wasn’t he?+

‘Yeah, all right, he was.’

+Why?+

‘I don’t know. And that’s the truth,’ It was.

+Tell me why that might have been.+

Siskind looked down at the floor. ‘I think he was hoping to recruit me. Hoping to try again. The cartel meets at Bonner’s Reach. I’ve been doing well this season. Thekla believed I could buy in.’

Every word of it was the truth. I couldn’t understand why I felt every word of it was also somehow rehearsed.

+Do you think that Thekla, having passed on the Flint moots, might have gone directly to Bonner’s Reach?+

‘That’s likely,’ he said.

+Master Siskind, I’m now going to withdraw my agents from your vessel and leave you alone. Thank you for cooperating with the Inquisition. Do not cross us again.+

‘I’ll try my frigging best.’

+For your information, I have had my people disassemble your communications array and your mass-drive regulators. Nothing has been damaged. I estimate it will take you four working days to refit the systems. My apologies for the inconvenience. But I don’t want you following me.+

He smiled. *You're a total bastard*, his mind said. 'Thank you, inquisitor,' his mouth covered.

DRIVE ENGAGED, THE *Hinterlight* began to describe a hard, tight trajectory out and away from the distant sun of the Flint system. The *Allure*, temporarily crippled and adrift, became an increasingly faint hard return on its aft sensors.

Ravenor glided down the midships companionway with Nayl, Kys and Zael trailing behind him. Apparently, Nayl had promised the boy a look at the bridge.

Halstrom was waiting for them at the bridge hatchway. 'Mr Thonius and I have done some research, sir,' he said. 'It took some rooting out of the database, in conjunction with the Carto-Imperialis, but we dug up "Firetide". It's—'

'A festival on Bonner's Reach. Due to begin about twenty days from now,' Ravenor said.

Halstrom wavered. 'Oh,' he said.

'Just because I got there first doesn't mean I don't appreciate your efforts, Mr Halstrom. Well done.'

He beamed. 'Thank you, inquisitor.'

'How's the mistress?' Nayl asked.

'Pissed off, Mr Nayl,' Halstrom said.

'But doing it anyway?' I wanted to know.

'Yes, ' said Halstrom. 'Course is set. Drive engaged. We're heading out into Lucky Space.'

Kys and Ravenor went in through the hatch, and moved across the bridge to join Cynia Preest.

'Thank you, Cynia,' Ravenor said.

'For what, Gideon?' she snapped, gruffly.

'For doing what you didn't want to do. For taking us out into Lucky Space.'

She looked up from her main station grimly. 'I don't like it, Gideon. Not at all. But I am in your service, and while that lasts, I do what I'm told.' She paused and then smiled. 'I understand Mr Halstrom is pretty keen on this whole venture.'

'I think he is,' Ravenor agreed. 'Cynia... you might describe yourself as a rogue trader...'

She halted, mid-action, and looked hard at the armoured chair. 'And? Where are you going with this?'

'If I gave you three-quarters of a million in ready cash, just how rogue could you be?'

IN THE BRIDGE doorway, Zael looked up at Harlon Nayl.

'Why's it called Lucky Space?' he asked.

Nayl grinned a not-at-all-reassuring grin. 'Because, once you're out in it, you're lucky if you last five minutes.'



FOUR

NO BUGGER GOES to Lenk any more.

Lenk was the end of the line, the most rim-ward world in the Angelus sub. Once it had been an important trade gateway through to the neighbouring Vincies sub-sector, ideally placed on a stepping-stone line of systems that formed a convenient trade lane down through places like Flint all the way to the sub's capital world. For over six thousand years, it had been a prosperous place.

Then the Vincies sub collapsed, almost overnight. There had been a gradual slump in trade, and a marked increase in lawlessness over a period of years, though nothing terminal. Slowly, the Vincies had become the Angelus's rougher neighbour. But the real collapse had been triggered by a warp storm that had swept, without warning, through a great rimward portion of the sub in 085.M41.

It was a notable disaster. The lethal storm had engulfed eighteen systems, including that of the Vincies's capital world, Spica Maximal. All of the sub-sector's primary population centres and industrial worlds were lost at a stroke. The death toll alone was unimaginably vast. Shorn of its central government, main markets and vital heartland, the sub-sector fell apart. Fifty or so Imperial worlds in the core-ward territories of the sub escaped the storm, but they were all minor colonies or secondary worlds and none had the power or wealth to assume responsibility as a new sub-sector capital. Some attempts were made to align them instead with the Angelus sub – effectively turning the remains of the Vincies sub into a fiefdom of its wealthy neighbour – but it never quite worked. The region fell away into lawless decay, no longer Imperial territory in any meaningful sense. Even the name withered. It was just Lucky Space now.

Lenk's fortunes withered too. The once-proud gateway market, the third wealthiest planet in the Angelus region after Caxton and Eustis Majoris, became a backwater. There was a long period of deprivation, popular unrest, and then a drawn-out, insidious civil war that resulted in a mass migration of its population back into the Angelus sub to begin new lives there.

Now the only trade that went through Lenk was the rogue kind. It became a last watering hole for pioneers and speculators brave or crazy enough to try and make money from Lucky Space ventures.

It had quite a reputation.

As a footnote to this misfortune, the warp storm finally blew itself out in 385, after three hundred years. Left behind in the ravaged rim-ward part of the old sub was a clutch of dead systems known as the Mergent Worlds, the scorched corpses of Imperial planets like Spica Maximal resurfaced from the deluge. They were tainted, of course. Utterly tainted, and utterly prohibited. A fiercely prosecuted interdiction by the Battlefleet Scarus hemmed the Mergent Worlds away from Imperial and non-Imperial contact alike.

'THE SHAVED HEAD of an old man, from behind, by candle light,' Kara said.

Nayl snorted.

'Not you, old man with a shaved head,' Kara laughed. 'A really old, wizened man.'

'Not bad,' Nayl conceded.

'Your turn.'

Nayl leaned on the iron guard rail and gazed down through the observation bay's segmented glasteel port. 'A citrus fruit,' he said at length.

'That's terrible. And you've used it before.'

'I have not.'

‘Have so. Ganymedae. Remember? A waxed citrus fruit, you said, sharp and acid.’

‘Can I finish? I hadn’t finished.’

Kara grinned, and made a deferring gesture. ‘Please, dig yourself out.’

‘I was going to say... a citrus fruit, one of the big, fat ones with the amber rind. And not only that, one that’s been in the fruit bowl too long and is just beginning to turn. A dusting of grey mould on the skin, a dimpled puffiness.’

She frowned. ‘Your metaphor being that it’s spoiled?’

‘Spoiled. Rotten.’

‘It’s all right, I suppose. A tad obvious.’

‘But “the shaved head of an old man from behind by candle light” isn’t?’

‘You’ve got to give me points for allegory.’

‘Allegory how?’

‘Allegory,’ she nodded. ‘The old man has seen better days and remembers them sadly. He’s worn out. He’s turned away, so we can’t see his face any more, or even tell if he’s alive. He’s poor, so he has to rely on candles. Which, of course, adds a poetic flourish about the colour.’

‘Poetic flourish my arse. My metaphor was clean and contained.’

‘Allegory beats metaphor. Every time. Hands down. I think I win.’

‘I think not.’

‘You’re a poor loser, Harlon Nayl. I’ve got you cold on this one. Have the grace at least to lose with good manners.’

‘What are you doing?’

They both started up and looked round from the rail. Timid and wan, Zael stood in the hatchway behind them, watching them.

‘Hello, Zael,’ said Kara with a broad smile. ‘What are you up to?’

‘Just... you know...’ He remained in the doorway, as if he felt safe there, and looked around at the gloomy observation bay. The only light, apart from lumin-strips along the edge of the grilled walkway, was coming in from outside.

‘What are you looking at?’ Zael asked.

Nayl waved him in and pointed out through the port. Nervously, Zael came through the hatch and crept out across the metal observation platform to the rail.

‘That’s Lenk,’ Nayl said.

Outside, cold blackness, pricked by hard star-points and the glimmering, lustrous skeins of distant clusters and more distant galaxies. Dominating the view was a mottled, bruised, orange sphere. It was a world – Zael knew that. A planet, sunlit and unshadowed, suspended by invisible physics in the darkness of space. They were looking down at it, as if from the roof of a hive stack. Zael wondered what his home looked like from this vantage point. Part of him yearned to be back on Eustis Majoris. Part of him never wanted to see it again.

‘Lenk,’ he said after a while. ‘Where’s that?’

‘Right here,’ grinned Kara, as if it was a trick question.

‘Are we flying past it?’

‘This is a starship, Zael,’ said Harlon. ‘It doesn’t fly. We’re at high anchor above Lenk. A stop-over. The Chair wanted to say hello to the Navy Station commander here. He’s gone down there with Mamzel Madsen.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s protocol,’ said Kara.

‘What’s that?’

Kara looked over Zael’s tousled head at Nayl and shrugged a ‘help me out here’.

‘It’s the done thing,’ Nayl said to the boy. ‘You know how an important player... a dealer say, makes sure he introduces himself to the moody hammers protecting a down-stack club. It’s polite. The dealer makes sure the moodies know who he is, and vice versa. To avoid trouble later.’

‘I get you,’ said Zael.

‘Well, that’s all he’s doing. The Fleet has a base here on Lenk. It runs operations up into the region we’re heading for. The Chair wants the

commander to know who he is and where he's going. In case we get into trouble.'

'What sort of trouble?'

It was Nayl's turn to glance at Kara.

'The hypothetical type,' Kara said.

'What's hypothetical?'

Kara crouched down so she was on a level with Zael. She rested her forearms on the rail and her chin on her forearms. 'We're not going to get into trouble. Of any sort. Inquisitor Ravenor—'

'The Chair,' Nayl corrected her.

Kara pursed her lips. 'Right... The Chair won't allow us to get into any trouble. We're safe. You're safe.'

Zael looked round at her. 'I like your hair that colour.'

Surprised, she reached up a hand and touched her short, shaggy fringe involuntarily.

'Thanks,' she said. 'I've been meaning to go back to red.'

'It's nice.'

The boy leant out over the rail and started looking from side to side.

'Careful,' Kara said. 'What are you doing?'

'The planet's not very interesting. What I really want to see is the ship.'

'What?' asked Nayl.

'The ship. I've never seen the ship. I've never seen any ship.' Zael pulled back. 'So what were you doing just then?' he asked them.

'We were playing a game,' Kara said.

'A game? How do you play it?'

'That's a good question,' said Nayl, staring at Kara. 'Some people make up the rules as they go along...'

'Oh, get over it,' she scoffed. She looked at Zael. 'Harlon and I have been playing the game since we first met. Whenever we reach a new planet, a new world, a new place, we get together in an obs bay like this, or get a pict of it on a repeater screen, and we play the game. The idea is to

describe the world... but not just what it looks like. Something that also describes what the place is like. It's character. That's how you win the game. Do you know what a metaphor is?

Zael thought about it. 'When you say something is like something else?'

'That's a simile,' said Nayl.

'Shut up, pedant,' Kara scolded him. 'Zael's on the right track. Why don't you play?' she asked the boy. 'Look down at Lenk. What does it look like to you?'

Zael stared down and screwed up his face in thought. 'An orange rubber ball I once owned.'

Nayl shrugged. Kara cocked her head. 'That's... that's good,' she said.

'Yeah, pretty good,' Nayl agreed kindly. 'Next time you might want to add some... you know... hidden meaning.'

'Like a baldy bloke with candles?'

'Exactly like a baldy bloke with candles,' Kara said.

'Or a citrus fruit...' Nayl began.

'Over, done, beaten,' Kara hissed. 'Get used to it.'

Zael was oblivious to their sparring. He leaned out again, craning his neck to see the flanks of the *Hinterlight's* hull.

'You really want to see the ship, don't you?' said Nayl.

'Yes.'

Nayl straightened up and looked at Kara. 'What's Rav— The Chair. What's The Chair's ETA?'

'Not due back for another six hours. Halstrom told me Preest was planning to quit orbit at midnight.'

'All right. Can you amuse yourself for a while?'

'Absolutely,' Kara said. 'I've been doing that for years. I'm getting good.'

'Don't start,' Nayl said.

'I'll go see Carl. He could do with cheering up,' she said.

'Fine,' Nayl looked at the boy. 'You're coming with me,' he said.

IT WAS GOOD, but not perfect. Better than that benighted selpic blue jacket at any rate. But still, the lifelessness of his arm creased the shoulder-line of the linen tunic in the most horrid way. He turned three-quarters, then back the other way, studying his look in the full length mirror.

Not good.

Carl Thonius, alone in his cabin, sighed deeply, and began to unbutton the tunic. He had to use his left hand, and when it came to taking the garment off, he had to scoop the shoulders over his head and slide it off his rigid limb.

Thonius had keyed the lights to low and locked the door. He'd put on a slate of his favourite music, but tonight even the light operetta *The Brothers of Ultramar* wasn't doing it for him.

His cabin suite, refined in its decor and usually immaculate, was a mess. Vox-slates were screed across the carpet. He'd lost patience trying to find something he wanted to listen to. His bed, and the dressing chairs and occasional table beside it, were enveloped in a mass of discarded clothes. He'd been through his wardrobe a dozen times, trying everything.

Maybe a full jacket of Gudrunite velvet? Perhaps a blouson of Rustedre shot-silk? What about, damn the season, a long kirtle of the most gorgeous green Sameter clorrie, with ivory toggles and a simply darling gilt brocade hem?

Nothing worked. Nothing hid or excused his damaged form.

At this rate, he'd be wearing a bodyglove. And, from there, it was a short step to shaving one's head and calling everybody *ninker*.

Thonius turned and looked for something else to try on. In doing so, he caught sight of himself in the long mirror, pale and naked from the waist up.

He paused, frozen. He'd always been proud of his thin, hairless, well-exercised form. Lean, he'd call it. Lean and gamine, perhaps.

All he could see was the arm. The dullness of it. The leaden hang. Medicae Zarjaran – may the Emperor bless his craft – had begun a programme of post-op rehabilitation. Thonius counted himself grateful

that he could now feel pins when they were stuck into his fingerpads. His digits still refused to move under their own power.

He looked at himself. Keening, the operetta was reaching the most passionate sequence, the loves lost-and-wronged part that he'd always adored.

He stared. Bio-pack dressing was taped around his right arm at the elbow.

With the tenor howling out a requiem for his fallen Astartes brothers, Thonius reached over with his left hand and began to rip the tapes away. His stare into the mirror didn't waver.

He stripped the dressing off and looked at what was revealed. The wound. The slice. Puckered, dead-looking flesh woven together with a million fibre-stitches. Blood and plasma-product still crusted the stitching. Clouds of bruises stained his bicep and forearm.

Staring at it, staring at it, staring at it, he became aware of the pain again: a dull throb, deep set, welling out from below the elbow. Over and over, he remembered the moment of severance. The wailing chainblade sawing around. Impact. Vibration. Shock. Pain. The astonishing notion that a fundamental part of oneself was no longer part of oneself at all.

Blood, in the air.

The smell of blood, the smell of sawed-through bone.

The pain was too much. He had gladstones in his buckle-bag, and lho in his desk, but that wouldn't do. He wanted release, craved it, begged for it.

Thonius took up the tiny key hanging around his neck on a sliver chain, and opened the top drawer of his bureau. He realised he was breathing hard.

The little package, wrapped tight in red tissue, lay inside.

He took it out, and opened it. For a moment, he paused, wiped a palm across his mouth, thought about it. Then he looked down into the flect.

It was nothing. It was just a piece of broken, coloured glass, It was a—

His feet began to tap. His body rocked back and forth. Wonderful, wonderful things happened inside his head.

Beautiful things. Extraordinary things. Reality chopped back and forth, like an automatic sliding door slamming open and closed. Everything was all right. *Everything*. He could see forever. He could hear and smell and *taste* forever.

The fingers of his left hand drummed, like a dancing spider, across the bureau.

The fingers of his right hand twitched.

‘Oh my god...’ he whispered.

He could see light. A long corridor of golden light. At the end of it was a shape. No, not a shape. He was rushing towards it. A chair. A chair. A chair.

A throne. A golden throne.

The man on the golden throne was smiling. It was a beautiful smile. It made everything all right. The man on the golden throne was smiling and beckoning to him.

For one, perfect moment, one moment of release, Carl Thonius felt immortal.

Bells were ringing.

Ringing.

Ringing.

Frigging ringing.

Thonius snapped up from the flect. He still felt glorious. Blessed. He heard the ringing again. It was the door-chime of his cabin.

‘Just a moment!’ he called out, and hastily stuffed the flect and its red tissue wrapper into the drawer.

He shut the drawer. With his right hand. He started at that. Emperor above! All of his last few actions had been made with his right hand. It was alive. It was—

Dead now. Limp. Useless.

The door chime rang again. Thonius got to his feet, pulled on his selpic blue jacket, and – with his left hand – activated the unlock stud on his

control wand.

The hatch opened. Smiling, perplexed, Kara Swole stepped into his cabin.

‘Just came to see how you were doing,’ she said. ‘So... how’re you doing?’

He smiled at her.

‘Kara, I’m doing just fine.’

THE FLYER GUNNED out of the *Hinterlight*’s main hangar, and skimmed down the body of the hull.

‘There,’ said Nayl. ‘What do you think of that?’

He kept the speed low, the course steady. In the co-pilot seat beside him, Zael gazed out of the port as the dark substance of the ship flowed past beneath them.

‘It’s big,’ was all the boy could really manage.

Nayl took them up the length of the ship and back four times. He could have done it all day. Zael wasn’t getting bored.

At length, Nayl said ‘Kys told me you’d been having dreams.’

‘Yeah, some. Some dreams.’

‘Often?’

‘Yeah, most nights. Someone knocking on the door. Trying to get in. They want to tell me something, but I don’t want to hear it.’

Nayl paused to see if Zael would volunteer anything else. The boy didn’t, so Nayl asked: ‘Who’s the someone?’

‘My sister, Nove.’

Nayl leaned gently on the stick and swung the gig around again to head back to the hangar.

‘I want you to talk to The Chair when he gets back,’ Nayl said.

‘Okay. I’ve been thinking about the game.’

‘The game?’ Nayl eased back the thrust as the guide signal for dock-entry began to bleep mutedly.

‘I said it looked like an orange rubber ball I’d once owned,’ said Zael.

‘Yeah, you did.’

‘You didn’t think that was very good, but it was. That’s what it looks like. I remember the ball. My sister gave it me when I was seven. A birthday present. It got bounced up and down the stack halls, it got all worn and scabby. All scarred, like that place. But it’s gone now. Lost somewhere. Like Nove. That’s why that world looks like the ball to me.’

Nayl sighed. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner.’



FIVE

CYNIA PREEST SIGHED gently. Save for her chin, her face was shadowed by the loose, fur-trimmed hood over her head, but in that shadow, Nayl could see a smile.

‘I rather thought,’ he whispered, ‘that smiling was something you hadn’t planned on doing out here in Lucky Space.’

‘Dear Harlon,’ she muttered, ‘permit me a moment of nostalgic pleasure. It’s been a long time. I’d forgotten the flavour of this place.’

Nayl hesitated. Whatever flavour the shipmistress was detecting was entirely lost on him. As far as he was concerned, Bonner’s Reach smelled of promethium, dust, ozone leaking from the ancient void-shields, spice-musks and perfumes, and a general humid, noisome odour of air that had been through the atmosphere processors a few million times too many.

‘I don’t think I’m really quite getting its charms,’ he decided.

Preest rested a gloved hand on his arm. ‘It has a certain character, Harlon. A robust vitality. You smell muggy filth, I breathe in vigour, zest, the aroma of a free trade station. I smell the frontier, the challenge of the beyond. I smell a truly neutral place where merchant venturers like myself can gather and do business away from Imperial scrutiny.’

She glanced round at her other companion, who flanked her to her left. ‘No offence,’ she added.

‘None taken,’ he replied. ‘When were you last here?’

‘An age ago. Decades. But it hasn’t changed. I’d forgotten it. I hadn’t realised how much I’d missed it. Again, no offence.’

‘Again,’ said the other companion, ‘none taken.’

THEY WERE MOVING along a stone jetty from the wharf towards the craggy bulk of Bonner's Reach. The jetty was sealed against the void by shimmering, intersected screen-fields projecting between hoops of infinitely old technology that formed archways along the stone walk. A hundred metres behind them, the great mass of the *Hinterlight* lay at grav anchor in the immense granite basin of a void-dock. A series of mag-baffles and airgates linked the merchantman to the end of the jetty.

Nayl had to admit that what Bonner's Reach lacked in olfactory sophistication, it more than made up for in visual impact. It had taken them seventeen days to reach it from Flint, but the view alone was worth the trip. Bonner's Reach was an airless rock tightly orbiting a feeble, unstable star at the very end of its staggeringly vast lifespan. Long before, before man had begun to walk upright, someone had built a great stone bastion into the rock of its surface. Internal spaces in the bastion were chiselled down into the rock itself. No one could explain its origin, or account for its manner of construction, nor even ascertain its age. Certainly no one could explain why its makers had abandoned the bastion and left not a shred of themselves behind.

Early human venturers had found the place empty and open to hard vacuum. Effective installation of power plants, void shielding and atmosphere processors had made it habitable, and it had remained so ever since.

Because the Reach had no atmosphere, visiting star-ships, even those of great tonnage, could come in close and sit at low anchor above the Lagoon, a vast crater-bowl that had been scooped from the rock in front of the bastion. Alternatively – for a higher fee – they could berth in one of the many void-docks and quays hewn into the mountainside out of which the bastion grew.

The view from the jetty was uncompromisingly strange. Looking out through the crackling void-fields that kept in the jetty's atmosphere, Nayl could see the vast, blackened elevation of the bastion, seamless stone cut by a non-human hand. Lights, yellow and tiny, glowed at pinprick

windows. He could see ships – giant starships – floating out there in the darkness above the hard-shadowed white expanse of the Lagoon. The crater was full of white dust, but it looked like a snowfield, a sea of unmarked snow, dotted like a snow-leopard's pelt with the shadows of the starship anchored above it. Nearer at hand, bulk freight craft and other merchantmen lay sheathed in their void-docks, umbilically linked to the bastion via the ghostly-lit spurs of landing jetties. The sense of scale was terrifying. He was used to looking down on planets from afar, from orbit. Now he stood on the very threshold of one – and not even a large one – and could look around to see great frigates, clippers and sprint traders suckled against its embracing bulk. With a contrasting point of reference like the *Hinterlight* in view, Nayl's mind balked a little at the dwarfing size of the world, and by extension any world, and by further extension, the Imperium.

And then, in turn, his tiny, inconsequential self.

PATIENCE KYS STROLLED onto the *Hinterlight*'s main bridge, her eyes on the principal display screen. It showed a view out across the Lagoon as captured by the forward pict-systems.

The bridge was quiet. Most of the primary crew-stations had been vacated. Oliphant Twu, Preest's unnervingly reticent Navigator, had been detached from his socket so he could enjoy a few hours rest in his quarters after the lengthy voyage. Kys was glad he was absent. Twu was always unfailingly polite and courteous to any passengers he encountered, but there was a loathsome aura about him that made most people uncomfortable and Kys positively ill. It was the constant, seething turmoil of his mind. It made her feel seasick. In its way, it was as bad as the blunter, Wystan Frauka.

Frauka himself was present on the bridge, though his limiter was active. He had slumped in the second helmsman's throne, one leg swinging over the arm, smoking as if it was his primary function in life. He nodded to Kys as she came in, and his face curled into an expression that she realised, with horror, was probably his idea of an alluring smile.

She ignored him. A trio of Preest's tech servitors was running standard overhauls on some of the tertiary system consoles on the far side of the bridge. She could hear the hiss and stutter of their gas-powered digits as they unscrewed retaining bolts.

Halstrom occupied the shipmistress's throne, maintaining an intent check on both the ship's engineering turn-around and external activity. He looked to Kys very much the part of a shipmaster, confident and proud of his place. Preest so seldom left the *Hinterlight* herself, it was rare he got the opportunity to stand in.

Thonius sat at the primary helm console to his left. He was flicking through hololith displays projected to his repeater screen from the main actuality sphere, manipulating the images with his good left hand, his right bound up in a sling. He seemed bored and preoccupied.

A few metres in front of Frauka, Ravenor's chair sat locked to the deck by its mag-clamps. The inquisitor's unit seemed inert. Fat cables spooled out of the chair via opened access points in its surface armour, and connected to four chunky portable units arranged around the chair on the deck. Psi-booster units. More cables ran from the units to an open inspection hatch in the side of Thonius's console, linked directly to the *Hinterlight*'s potent astrocommunication dishes.

Kys walked up to Halstrom and perched her bottom on the edge of his console desk.

'Mistress Preest doesn't approve of people sitting on the bridge stations,' Halstrom began.

'Oh dear,' said Kys. 'Is she on the bridge?'

'You know she's not...' Halstrom began.

'Then I'd say it was up to the acting master who sits where.'

Halstrom coloured slightly and then grinned. 'Point, Mamzel Kys. This is my watch for a change. You're fine where you are.'

She grinned back. She liked Halstrom. Old school, reliable, kinda sexy too, if a girl had a mind to go for distinguished older males. Which she never had. Not after Sameter.

‘How are they doing?’ she asked.

‘They’ve left the airgate. Heading down the jetty towards the station threshold.’

‘They’re taking their frigging time about it,’ Thonius complained tersely.

Kys looked over at Thonius. ‘What’s your problem? Got a hot date waiting?’

Frauka sniggered loudly. Halstrom chuckled and made himself busy.

‘Screw you, Kys,’ Thonius said.

And so the banter begins, Kys thought. Since they’d met, she and Carl Thonius had spent their time sparring. It was part of the team spirit. But, she considered, ‘screw you’ lacked a great deal of the expected Thonius finesse.

She slid off Halstrom’s console and crossed to Thonius’s side.

‘What’s up?’

He shrugged and glanced up at her. ‘Sorry,’ he said.

‘Nothing to be sorry for. You’re tense.’

‘I don’t know why they’re taking so long,’ he said. He reached out with his left hand and methodically tapped out a control function that would normally have taken him an instant with both hands. The display image dissolved and changed. Now it showed an overview of the docking jetty through one of the *Hinterlight*’s starboard pict-sources.

There was the jetty, encased in its gleaming sleeve of void-fields, stark against the blackness around and beneath it. She could see the landing party. Preest – in full robes and finery – riding aboard an ornamental floater carriage that she controlled with an actuator wand in her right hand. Two bodyguards – tall, heavysset men – walked with her, one on either side of the carriage. They were clad in long, quilted coats and ornamental full-face helms, and each carried a long pole upright. The two poles supported a small canopy above Preest’s head.

Behind them came a train of six cargo-servitors laden with caskets.

The bodyguard at Preest's right hand was Nayl. The one to her left – nominally – was Zeph Mathuin. But to all intents and purposes, it was Ravenor. The inquisitor was waring Mathuin's body.

‘They’re just making a dramatic entrance,’ Kys suggested. ‘You know the mistress. She likes to arrive in style. Regally.’

‘Maybe,’ Thonius said.

Kys leaned over and tapped a few keys, swinging the image around to show more of the bastion itself. Mysteries and rumours adhered to Bonner's Reach as they did to all outlandish places. Some said the first venturers to come here found unimaginable treasures deep in the bastion's chambers. Others said there were still corridors and halls cut into the rock down there that no one had yet traced or followed. Many supposed that ancient and profoundly powerful xenos technology, left behind by the builders of the place, had been found. One particular, popular story had it that once in a while, a visitor would go missing... lost forever after taking a wrong turn somewhere, or perhaps taken by the spirit of the place as a payment for continued human use of the structure.

Every few minutes there was a brief flash or fizzle of light. These were photonic flare-patterns, beginning to stutter out from the planet's old and dying star. At this early stage, these emissions were just precursor flashes. In ten or twelve hours' time, they would have matured into a full-blown solar storm that would fill the sky with flame and last for three days. The storms happened every thirty-five months.

That was Firetide, when the ships put in at Bonner's Reach and their masters feasted and drank while the heavens blazed.

Kys sighed. Thonius's edginess was infectious. ‘I don't know why we can't just march in and flash our warrants and—’

‘Look out there, Mamzel Kys,’ Halstrom pointed, indicating the main display. ‘Look at the ships gathered there over the Lagoon. I see rogue traders, far venturers, merchantmen of all sizes... and that? What's that? And that? And that over there, the disk-shaped vessel? That's two hundred kilometres away, to give you some sense of scale. This is a frontier in both

directions, Mamzel. A fair number of the visitors here have never heard of our authority. Those that have care less for it.'

'That's what free trade station means,' Thonius said. 'This is Lucky Space, free space, a gateway. We Imperials are only tolerated visitors here.'

'The stuff you know,' Kys mocked.

'You wouldn't believe,' Thonius replied.

THEY WERE APPROACHING the entry gate at the end of the jetty. Its ancient stone form was decorated with interwoven carved figures that symbolised leaping flame. Heaps of votive offerings were piled up either side of the gate pillars. Dolls, figurines, ritual pots, small tied-up sacks, drinking vessels, ribbons, occasionally an icon like an aquila; and those were simply the ones of human origin that Nayl could identify. Any others were alien objects he could make no sense of. It was customary to leave a token offering at the gate on departure, to vouchsafe one's next voyage.

Two Vigilants awaited them at the gate.

'You ready with the tribute?' Preest whispered.

'The servitors have been instructed,' Ravenor replied through Mathuin's mouth.

The Order of Vigilants administered the Reach. They collected tariffs, saw to the station's smooth running, and to the congress of fair trade. The pair that now approached them were lean and tall, at least as tall as Harlon or Zeph. They walked with an easy, nimble step that told Nayl right off they were consummate close fighters. Each Vigilant wore a sleeveless, antique gown of ribbed armour, marvellously constructed, baggy black pantaloons that were tight-cinched at the ankle, and black felt slippers that were shaped around the big toe. Their exposed arms were either bionic, or encased in some form of skinplant technology. It was a tech-design neither Nayl nor Ravenor had ever seen before. Sheathed over their shoulders they carried ceremonial hand-and-a-half swords.

Their heads were bare and shaved. More of the curiously-wrought skinplant tech encased their necks, so that their heads seemed to be resting on slender columns of intricately inscribed metal. The skin of their faces and scalps was entirely covered in swirling flame tattoos, echoing the design around the doorway. Their eyes were augmetic implants that glowed a dull green.

‘Welcome,’ said one. Its voice was like silk.

‘The immaterium has brought you to Bonner’s Reach,’ said the other, its tone rasping and deep.

‘Free trade is welcome here,’ uttered the first.

Perched on her hovering platform, Preest bowed. ‘Thank you for your greeting and welcome,’ she said. ‘I most humbly crave admittance. I have brought a tribute for the welfare of all.’

‘Let us examine it,’ said the rasping one.

At a signal from Nayl, the servitors brought forward the caskets and opened some of them. Foodstuffs, much of it stasis-fresh, wine and some flasks of amasec.

‘This is acceptable tribute,’ said the rasping Vigilant.

‘Welcome,’ repeated the silky one. ‘Do you wish us to advertise your presence and identity to the merchants here?’

‘I am Shipmistress Zeedmund. Of the sprint trader *Tarnish*. I am here for Firetide, but I also seek interesting commerce.’

‘Zeedmund. *Tarnish*...’ they echoed.

‘I have serious collateral,’ she added. ‘Make that known. I am interested in genuine business.’

‘You appreciate the Code of the Reach?’ asked the Vigilant with the silk voice.

‘Peace and discourse,’ Preest replied. ‘And no weapon within the bounds of the Reach with a range longer than a human arm.’

Nayl and Mathuin dutifully displayed the empty holsters at their hips, the ritual sign of unarmed intent.

‘You are familiar with our rules,’ said the silky-voiced Vigilant.

‘You have been here before,’ the rasping one said. It was more of a statement than a question. Nayl stiffened.

‘I am a trader,’ said Preest. ‘I go where I please.’

‘Voice-pattern records show you to be Cynia Preest, shipmistress. Not Zeedmund.’

‘Traders change their identities. Is that a problem?’

‘Not at all. We are ever discreet,’ The Vigilants stood aside and ushered them through the threshold. ‘Enter and make your trade.’

Beyond the gate, they entered a capacious chamber hewn out of the planetary rock. The air was still muggy and over-used. The place was bathed in a yellow, fulminous light from bioluminescent tank-lamps mounted at regular intervals along the wall. Archways led off into other chambers, and at the far end, a well-lit tunnel disappeared away into the free trade areas. More Vigilants appeared, to conduct Preest’s servitors to the communal larders where the tribute could be left.

One of them, his voice a whisper, approached the ship-mistress.

‘Do you require a guide? A translator? Any other service?’

‘I will ask if I need any such service,’ she said. The Vigilant bowed and backed away.

With her bodyguards either side of her, Preest began to glide sedately down the long tunnel.

ON BONNER’S REACH, visiting traders could avail themselves of drink and nourishment free of charge. Indeed, almost all services were free. A berthing fee was required, of course, but once that was paid, a trader could luxuriate in the bountiful hospitality of the station. The level of comfort was designed to relax visitors and encourage profitable, unhurried mercantile negotiation. The Vigilants merely expected a fee equivalent to one per cent of gross on any deal or transaction made within their precincts.

Of course, this apparent largesse was helped enormously by the recognised custom of tribute. Every captain, master or venturer, human or otherwise, was expected to offer something in the way of foodstuffs, liquor or other intoxicants upon arrival.

Preest's tribute was conducted down three kilometres of rock-cut corridors into a handling bay that adjoined one of the station's many food preparation areas. There the servitors set the caskets down as instructed and made their way back to the *Hinterlight*. A Vigilant labelled the caskets with storage instructions. Before long, kitchen labour would sort through the caskets and distribute the contents: perishables into cold stores and stasis vaults, wine to cellars, dry goods to the well-stocked pantries, specialist foods into appropriate containers, and narcotics to the tenders who walked the floors of the free trade salons.

The Vigilant was called away. Two pot-men were having an altercation in the nearby kitchen.

Preest's caskets were left unattended against the wet quartz wall of the handling bay.

The lid of the fourth casket along popped open. Telescopic levers hissed taut, lifting the produce tray up, revealing it to be merely a shallow false top.

Breathing deeply and slowly, Kara Swole slid herself out of the hidden cavity. She had contorted her body into a tiny space. As she emerged, she paused, grimacing, to pop her shoulder joints back into place.

Kara looked around. There was no time to complete a full body recovery here. She reached her hands up and detached the fibre-optic patch from over her left eye. The adhesive took some lashes with it. She rubbed her eye and wound the patch up in its long string of wire, unplugging the far end of it from the inside of the casket. Thanks to the fibre-optic, she'd been able to see a cold-light view of the outside and judge the best time for emergence accordingly.

Keeping a watchful eye around her, Kara tucked the fibre-optic into a hip pouch. She was wearing a skin-tight light-reflective bodyglove with only

her head exposed. Her thick red hair was slicked into a tight latex net that made her look bald. She opened the next casket along, and removed its false top layer too. Her equipment was stowed beneath. First, a small, prepacked rucksack on a tight fylon harness. Then, a compact vox, and a multikey that slipped neatly into holder loops on her waistband.

Her limbs and back were sore. She stayed wary, expecting discovery at any moment. The thin combat knife slipped into place in her glove's calf sheath. Nearly done.

She could hear footsteps approaching. One last task. Two almost empty tribute caskets would be more than a little suspicious. She tore open the shrink-wrapped packs of dehydrated kelp and shook their dry contents out into the bottom of each casket. Then she tore the top off a water flask and emptied its glugging contents after them.

Footsteps came closer. She pushed the produce trays back into place, closed the casket lids, and dashed into the shadows at the far end of the handling bay. Then, like an arachnid, she went clear up the sheer quartz wall. The palms and soles of her bodyglove were angle-ribbed with razor-steel filament hooks that could find purchase on almost any surface. She reached the top of the wall, slid into a rocky cavity, and lay still.

A troupe of kitchen labourers wandered into the bay below her, flipping up the lids of Preest's caskets to examine the fare. As she watched, they opened the casket where she had been concealed and took out the top tray.

The rest of the casket was chock full of glistening kelp. She heard the labourers scoff and moan. It was typical cheapskate rogue trader behaviour. Come bearing plenty when in fact most of the makeweight was sea cabbage.

Kara grinned to herself.

As soon as the labourers began to heft the caskets out into the larders, Kara began to move again, scuttling across the rock wall and in under the great flinty arch to the kitchen. Her arms and legs were throbbing with pain. Sheer climbing put an enormous stress on musculature, and her body wasn't yet limber from the forced contortions of the casket.

She forced herself on. A cramp in her left calf lost her some grip, but she clenched her teeth and persisted.

The kitchen below her was a vast and dingy haze, steam surging up from a dozen canisters on a dozen stoves, smoke trailing off roast veal and orkunu and marinated sinqua on the fire pits, drums of broiling ketelfish, pans of frying lardons, tureens of potage, steamers of fubi dumplings and blanching wilt-leaf. The roof of the chamber was a thick smog, which suited her just right. Though stone-cut, the kitchen hall was bolstered with thick cross-members of steel that formed ceiling beams. She dropped down onto the nearest one, swathed in oily smoke and vapour. There, invisible to the staff twenty metres below her, she stood for a long while, tension-flexing and relaxing her tortured body. Arms, joints, digits, spine, ribs, pelvis. As if performing to some great invisible audience, she began to stretch and slide, backflip, rotate and split.

Then she lay on her back on the beam, the kitchen clattering and broiling below her. She was still sore – that was inevitable after two hours in the box. But she was at last spry and warmed up.

Kara Swole rolled over, rose and began to run across the beam towards the interior of the station.

IT WAS THE worst dream yet. Something liquid yet solid was pouring in under Zael's hab door. It was black and it was stinking. Like his granna's glue. Like her frigging mind-burning glue!

He tried to wake granna. She was asleep in her chair, snoring. When he shook her, his hands went into her flesh like it was rotten, flybown meat. Yelping out in revulsion, he backed away and grabbed his granna's little effigy of the God-Emperor from the top of the cupboard. Zael held it out at the viscous horror spurting in around the door cracks into the kitchen.

'Go away, Nove! Go away! Leave me alone!'

Something he needs to know...

He stifled a scream and—

WOKE UP.

Zael moaned and turned over in his cot. The cabin was dark, but he had left a light on in the bathroom. Its frosty glow spilled out across the gloomy space.

He was breathing hard. He wanted to call for Nayl, or Kara or even Kys, but he remembered they were engaged on some sort of mission. He wondered if he should try to contact The Chair. Nayl had advised him too, back at that place... what was it? Lenk?

He hadn't. He hadn't dared. He still didn't really know what The Chair had brought him along for or why The Chair considered him special. But he didn't want to spoil things. He didn't want to give The Chair an excuse to ditch him.

And what was this? Wasn't this excuse enough? Zael was having nightmares. His head was on wrong. After weeks, he was still witchy with come-down symptoms.

Zael sat up in the dark. He pushed his pillow across his knees and then leaned his head into it.

He wished, really wished, he could be a person like Nayl. A sorted out, in-control person. Or like Kara. Hell, even like Kys or Thonius.

Zael heard a sound from the bathroom. Like a block of soap falling from the rack, or a rubber ball bouncing in the metal drain-tray.

How could a—

He rose to his feet, holding the pillow in front of him like the most frigging pathetic shield in the Imperium. Water was hissing in the bathroom now, the shower head. Hot water. Steam gusted out of the cubicle, filming the glass door.

There was someone in there, inside the shower cube. Someone fogged by steam and water.

Zael swallowed hard. 'Hello?'

'Zael?' The voiced echoed out over the rush of the shower. Zael heard someone spit out water to say the name.

‘Yeah. Who’s in there?’

‘It’s me, Zael.’

‘Who’s me?’

‘Frig’s sake, Zael! Don’t you know your own sister?’

Zael began to back away. ‘My sister... she’s dead. You’re not my sister..’

‘Course I am, little,’ said the misty figure behind the glass door. ‘Why do you think I’ve been trying so hard to find you?’

‘I don’t know...’ Zael murmured.

‘Everything’s joined, little. Everything’s linked. Space, time, souls, the God-Emperor... it’s all one big, connected everything. You’ll understand it when you’re here with me.’

‘With you? What do you want, Nove?’

‘I have to tell you something. Okay?’

‘What?’

The shower shut off abruptly.

‘Snatch me a towel, little. I’m coming out.’

‘N-no! No, don’t—’

The stall door opened. His sister stood before him. Fully dressed, soaking wet from the shower, haloed by steam.

And as burst and broken as she had been when they’d found her at the foot of the hab stack.

Zael simply blacked out.

‘LET’S CIRCULATE,’ CYNIA Preest suggested. Her voice had a sly tone to it. She was enjoying this, and that pleased me. Bonner’s Reach seemed to have reawakened Preest’s enthusiasm for my hazardous occupation. For the first time in years, she was positive and engaged, probably because at last she had a proactive part to play.

We were standing in the stone entrance arch of one of the principle free trade salons. The scale of the chamber impressed me. It was bigger than the Carnivora, bigger than the interiors of some Ecclesiarchy temples I’d

seen. A monstrous chamber hollowed from the planet's rock, lit by huge biolumin tank-lights suspended in clusters from the faraway roof. The other end of the chamber was so far away I could barely see it.

Even through Zeph Mathuin's enhanced optics.

A flight of marble stairs led down from the archway into the floor of the salon. Below us, hundreds – thousands, perhaps – of figures were gathered informally, drinking, talking, discoursing, trading. On our level, side galleries swept away around the walls of the hall. Looking up, I saw further tiers of galleries, twenty or more, circling the chamber all the way up to the ceiling.

The side galleries, enjoying a view over the salon's main floor, were for private negotiations. There were booths spaced regularly around their circuits, softly lit, where traders dined together, gamed, and indulged. A quick muster of my mind, boosted as it was by the amplifiers on the *Hinterlight's* bridge, told me some various booths were vox-screened, some pict-opaque, and most of them were psi-shielded. A trader entering a booth could activate discretionary barriers to keep his commerce private.

We went down the steps into the throng. Preest hovered her way down like some monarch on her archaic floater carriage. It was a business to keep the canopy decorously unfurled above her.

I switched my mind from side to side, like a broom, sweeping up scraps of detail from the scene. Preest was in her element, confident, happy in a way that surprised even her.

Nayl was tense. A passing taste of his mind told me he didn't like it. I could hear a repeating mantra circling in his thoughts... *way too exposed... too many angles... no cover... way too exposed.*

+It'll be fine.+

He glanced at me. His expression was hidden by the visor of his blast helm. I glimpsed his eyes.

'Very well,' he said, reluctantly.

+What's the trouble?+

'Nothing, boss. Nothing.'

We proceeded onto the floor of the salon. I took a selfish moment to enjoy this brief stint of physicality. I relished the body I was wearing: its power, its strength, its mobility. Zeph was almost too easy to wear, one of the key reasons I had employed him. Wearing others was often traumatic to both me and them, but Zeph Mathuin gave up his corporeal form without any negative resistance. I borrowed his flesh like a man might borrow another's coat. When the time came for us to change back, neither of us ever suffered any consequences more serious than fatigue.

On we moved, through the jostling, chattering floor space of the salon. On every side, rogue traders chatted and bartered with others of their kind. Bodyguard cadres sat around low tables, getting drunk while they waited for their masters and mistresses to finish socialising. Races mixed. I saw eldar, of a craftworld unknown to me, resplendent in polished white armour, engaged with a fat human in furs riding on a lifter throne. Nekulli hunched and chattered around a trio of methane breathers who were tanked inside bizarre viro-armours that glistened like silver and exuded noxious odours. A bounty hunter in full body plate strode past us, trailed by his servitor drones. To my left, a kroot cackled and barked. To my right, a trader whose body was entirely augmented chortled a mechanical chortle as the shapeless being he was dealing with cracked a joke. The trader was exquisite: his body parts and face were machined from gold, his dental ivory set perfectly in gilded gums, his eyes real and organic.

Some abominable form of opal-shelled mollusc hovered on a lifter dais and fluttered its eye stalks and elongated mandibles at a rogue trader in a red blastcoat. As we went by, I saw that the rogue trader was human except for his transplanted feline eyes. Something humanoid but not human, an elongated figure in a white vac-suit, its skin blue, its neck serpentine, blinked its large mirror eyes at a monthropod and its larvae. The monthropod and its kin curved their tube forms backwards and clattered their mouthparts to pay homage.

Forparsi drifters in gowns embroidered with stellar charts examined the product examples of jokaero technology. A human trader with mauve skin-dye studied an outworld prospector's gem samples through a jeweller's lens. I saw guildsmen amongst the rabble. The Imperial merchant guilds were supposed to limit their activities to inter-Imperium commerce, but it was well known they had no desire to see the potentially vast profits of the outworld markets go only to the free venturers and rogues.

Everywhere, tenders went to and fro. Some were girls, some boys, many were xeno-forms. They scurried to serve drinks and provide other diversions.

Preest held out a hand and stopped one, a handsome, hairless youth.

'What is it your pleasure, mistress?' he asked. 'I have some of glad and some of grin and also fine sniff-musk.'

'Three amasecs,' Preest said. 'Make them all doubles.'

The tender scooted off.

Several merchants made formal approaches to Preest, but she politely expressed disinterest to each after a few words had been exchanged. One, however, was especially persistent. He was a mutant or a hybrid, unnaturally short and wide, a dwarf by human standards. His hair flew back behind him in a great crest. His thick chin sported a shaved-back goatee. He was dressed in a dark red body-glove armoured with suspended metal plates. His bodyguard – a single, unimpressive elquon manhound with dejected eyes and heavy, drooping jowls – accompanied him.

Approaching Preest, he turned her a deft bow.

'Do I have the habit of acquainting Shipmistress Zeedmund?' he said. Though he was making an effort to affect a tone of high-born class, he could not disguise the common twang in his voice, nor the fact that Low Gothic was not his native tongue.

'I am Zeedmund,' said Preest.

'I am most audible to meet you,' said the little master. I tried to scan him, but realised he was wearing some type of blocker. 'Mistress, what say we

chivvy us up some appendable tenders, attire ourselves some disgustable comestibles, and revive to a private booth for intercultation?’

Preest smiled at him. ‘Why... would we do that?’

‘It has been brought to my apprehension by the Vigilants that you are in the marketplace, so to speak, for suggestive retail propositioning. In that rearguard, I am your man.’

‘Really,’ Preest said. ‘Who are you?’

‘Milady, my mamzel... I am Sholto Unwerth. Do not be deceived by my diminutive stature. I may not stand tall, but I cast, so to speak, a long shadow. And that shadow is entirely made up of trade.’

He said the last with emphasis, as if we should be struck with wonder at his pitch. We were, though it’s fair to say not for the reasons he hoped.

‘Do you want me to get rid of him?’ I heard Nayl whisper to Preest.

Unwerth heard him too. He held up a hand, the chunky fingers splayed. ‘Now, now. There’s no need for musculature.’

Nayl glared at him. Unwerth tugged his own earlobe. ‘I miss nothing, eaves-wise. Ears as sharp as pencils, me. No, no. All fair. If Mistress Zeedmund here finds me an abject increment in her affiliations, and wants no more of me, all she has to overtake is a word in my general. A simple ingratitude from her, and I will be, so to speak, out of your air. Without any requisite for shoving, slapping or harsh language. On the however hand, if what I have so far expleated trickles her fancy, I would be most oblate to dispell some more, at her total inconvenience, on the subject of what I have pertaining in my cargo hold.’

‘A moment. Master Unwerth,’ Preest said.

‘By all means, have a sundry of them,’ he said.

Preest turned to Nayl and me. ‘He’s just the thing. Trust me on this. I know how places like this are. Can’t you just smell the desperation? He’s so hungry for trade, his tongue’s going to be a lot looser than most around here.’

‘It’s your call,’ I said.

‘Just hang around and look bored,’ Preest said.

‘Not a problem,’ Nayl growled.

‘Master Unwerth,’ Preest announced, turning back to face him. ‘I would be delighted to discuss potential trade opportunities with you.’

He looked stunned for a moment. ‘Really?’ he mouthed. Even his manhound temporarily lost its dejected expression. Unwerth recovered fast. ‘Well, I’m ensconced by your cordium. It quite inflates me. Let us revive at once to a booth and digress in private.’

He became quite animated, leading us through the crowd and up one of the marble staircases to the first gallery. As he went, he summoned tenders and made a great show of ordering up a handsome dinner. We followed. As it turned to fall into step with us, the manhound gave me a long-suffering shrug that quite warmed me to it.

Unwerth found a free booth and pulled himself up onto one of the seats. Preest stepped down off her carriage and sat opposite him. Already, tenders were arriving with trays of sweetmeats, savouries and drinks. The manhound went to sit down beside its master, but Unwerth glanced at it sharply and hissed, ‘Not on the furniture, Fyflank!’

Rebuked, it curled up on the floor outside the booth and began to scratch its neck lugubriously with a hind-claw, causing a slapping ripple to travel up its overhanging jowls.

One of them – Unwerth or Preest – activated a pict-opaque field, and Nayl and I were left outside to guard the carriage. We leaned the canopy poles against the wall. The manhound looked at us, then settled its chin on its paws and began to doze.

I followed Harlon to the gallery rail and we looked out across the salon.

‘This is taking a long time...’ he said.

‘I never expected this to be quick,’ I replied. ‘Or easy. I have faith in Cynia. We take her skills as a pilot for granted. It’s about time we made use of her skills as a trader.’

‘Maybe. Kara okay?’

‘Yes. I can sense her. She’s in and moving.’

‘That’s something.’

He was about to say something else when there was a sudden commotion on the salon floor below us. The manhound raised its head sleepily. Nayl and I straightened up from the rail for a clearer view.

A fight had broken out. The crowds of merchants drew back to give it room, peering at the action. In a few scant seconds, Vigilants had appeared, swords drawn, and formed a cordon around the fracas. I expected them to stop it, but they didn’t. They simply kept the crowds at bay. It seemed that any physical dispute was allowed to find its own resolution, provided those involved stuck to the station rules about weapons.

There were four combatants: a slender human trader with a mane of frizzy white hair, dressed in a long, grey blastcoat, his two skin-gloved bodyguards, and a big brute wearing carapace armour that looked as if it had been made from mother-of-pearl. The armoured man was bare-headed. He had a stripe of bleached hair running across his scalp and his face was threaded with old scars. His nose and ears were just nubs of gristle. He was swinging a power maul in his left hand.

The trader, screaming out to the crowd and the Vigilants for sympathy and help, was trying to stay out of the actual clash. His minders had drawn short swords and wore buckler shields on their left wrists. The armoured brute took one out almost at once, leaving the man twitching on the deck, his body crackling with dissipating electrical charge. The onlookers clapped and whistled.

The other bodyguard flashed in, stabbing with his sword and deflecting the maul with his buckler. The sword made no dent whatsoever on the pearl armour. Ducking under a final, desperate stab, the armoured man swung the maul in hard and connected with the minder’s face. The minder slammed backwards, turning an almost complete backflip. He was dead, of that I was certain. The electrical charge of the maul was enough to incapacitate, but the physical blow alone had crushed his skull.

More approval from the crowd.

His bodyguard down, the trader turned and tried to flee. The Vigilants pushed him back into the open. As the armoured man came charging towards him, uttering a bellicose yell, the trader frantically reached into his blast-coat and pulled a revolver.

One of the Vigilants turned and broke from the cordon with stunning speed. His sword whistled down in an elegant slice and severed the trader's hand at the wrist. Hand and gun hit the deck and bounced.

A half-second later, the power maul had laid the trader out. Holstering his maul in a leather boot across his back, the armoured man grabbed the trader's convulsing, sparking body and held it up with one hand, the frizzy white hair pulled back to reveal the man's face to the crowd. With his other hand, the armoured man raised a warrant slate that displayed a hololimic picture of the trader's face.

The crowd began to boo and jeer, returning to their business. The cordon broke up, and the Vigilants gathered up the fallen bodies.

'Bounty hunter,' Nayl said.

'Yeah?'

'You saw him flash the warrant. This place is crawling with hunters. They're looking for absconders and evaders. My guess is they locate them here and then either pick them up once they leave or... if they're bold like Worna there... take 'em down in public.'

'You know him?' I asked. It was silly question. Nayl had been a bounty man himself for many years. He knew the industry, and its more notable players.

'Lucius Worna? Of course. Been in the game fifteen decades. Piece of shit.'

'And there are others around?'

'Everywhere. We've been scanned at least six times since we came in. Hunters check everyone out. They never know who they might run into in a place like this.'

I was alarmed. I hadn't noticed. Waring a body like Mathuin, I expended a lot of my power simply controlling the form. It deprived me of the full

scope of abilities I enjoyed in person. Suddenly, I felt vulnerable. I understood Nayl's worried state.

This was a dangerous place.

THE SOLAR FLASHES were coming so frequently now that Halstrom had dimmed the bridge screen resolution. He remained seated in the mistress's throne, running and rerunning diagnostic checks on the main console display to take his mind off the wait. Ravenor's chair was just a silent shape, immobile.

Thonius had crossed to Frauka, and the two men were playing virtual regicide on a hololith repeater. Kys watched them. Thonius accepted another of Frauka's lho-sticks and they carried on, smoking, playing, chatting quietly.

Frustrated, Kys paced up and down the main aisle of the bridge between the consoles for a while. She was so bored, she even stepped into the vacant Navigator's socket to try it out for comfort.

'Please, don't do that.' Halstrom called.

Kys looked at him.

'Even on my watch. Twu is very particular about his socket.'

Kys sniffed and got out. 'Aren't we all?'

She wandered back to Halstrom.

'You're bored,' he observed.

'No. Oh, all right, yes. But edgy too.'

'I know what you mean,' Halstrom smiled. Almost involuntarily, he flicked up another screen display. 'See that?'

'Un huh,' she said. 'What is it?'

'Haven't the faintest,' he replied. 'Just a bunch of figures and runes. I keep punching it up, looking at it, but... no idea what it means.'

She looked at him. 'You're joking.'

Halstrom grinned. 'Of course I am. It's the atmosphere post-process chart. But the point is made. I'm just filling time. Is it always like this?'

‘What?’

‘Work. Your work. As a Throne agent I thought it would be exciting. Cloak and dagger stuff. We don’t get to sample it much, us in the crew. You’re down on planets, doing who knows what. We’re up at anchor, waiting. I got quite excited when the inquisitor said we were going out hunting in Lucky Space. But it’s... it’s not really what I imagined.’

‘Believe me, it often goes this way,’ Kys said. ‘Waiting, watching, getting jangly with nerves. Sometimes I think boredom is a more serious threat to us than heresy.’

Halstrom chuckled. ‘You must have devised coping strategies by now.’

‘Must we?’

‘Of course.’

‘You’re the ones who do the waiting usually,’ Kys reminded him. ‘What do you do?’

Halstrom waved his hand at the console display. ‘This, mostly.’

She sat on the arm of his throne. Behind them, Frauka won another game, and he and Thonius celebrated by lighting another pair of lho-sticks.

Kys looked back at Halstrom. ‘What else do you do?’ she asked.

‘We talk,’ he replied. ‘Reminisce. Preest is good at that. Her stories are wonderful. Have you heard any?’

‘No. I don’t know her very well at all.’

‘Magnus, the second helmsman, he’s good value too. I get all my jokes from him. We talk about our lives and where we come from and so forth.’

‘And it passes the time?’

‘Passes it fairly. We could try that, Mamzel Kys. I know nothing about you.’

‘I know nothing about you, Mr Halstrom.’

He sat up. ‘Mutual ignorance. I think that sounds like a grand place to start. You first, where were you born?’

‘Sameter, in the Helican sub.’

‘Ah, dingy Sameter. I know it well.’

‘You?’

Halstrom shrugged. ‘My family comes from Hesperus, but I was born on Enothis.’

‘That’s a long way away. In the Sabbath Worlds.’

‘Indeed. We travelled a lot. My father was in the Fleet, and I followed after him.’

Kys leaned back. ‘Into service, you mean? You were a captain once, weren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he said. Absently, he switched the display to another diagnostic graphic. ‘But it’s my turn to ask. Is that your real name?’

Kys shook her head. ‘It’s my trophy name.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Halstrom.

‘I thought we were taking it in turns?’

‘This is still my turn. What’s a trophy name?’

‘It’s one you get given when you’re a trophy. Terra, Mr Halstrom! You think *Patience Kys* is a genuine name?’

‘I did wonder. It sounded rather... how can I put it?’

‘Ridiculous?’

‘No, no... I was shooting for *theatrical*.’

Kys laughed. ‘My sisters and I were all given names. It was part of the game.’

Halstrom turned in his seat to look straight at her. ‘Game? I get the impression from your tone that this game was far from pleasant. It may be something you don’t wish to talk about—’

‘Correct.’

‘But still,’ he shrugged. ‘If it’s a name that you were given against your will, why would you keep it? Why don’t you go back to your original name?’

Kys thought before she answered. Her face went serious. ‘Because it keeps me sane to remember where I’ve been. And I made a promise, a long time ago, that the name wouldn’t be forgotten.’

‘Oh,’ Halstrom said.

‘I think that makes it my turn,’ Kys said. ‘Why aren’t you a fleet captain any more?’

Halstrom sat back and closed his eyes. ‘I think your ground rules established that there are some things we don’t wish to talk about.’

‘No fair!’ Kys said, slapping him harmlessly on the arm. ‘You can’t dodge the question.’

‘They’re pretty,’ Halstrom said. ‘Are they a recent acquisition?’

He was pointing at the glittering fish scales looped over her throat stud.

‘Thank you. Yes, they are. I picked them up on Flint. But you’re avoiding my question again.’

‘I know,’ he began. ‘I don’t like to talk about—’

Halstrom broke off. There had been a quick, choppy, blurt on the ship’s intervox.

Suddenly sharp, he leaned forward.

‘What was that?’

‘You tell me,’ Kys said, rising to her feet. Frauka and Thonius were still playing their game.

Another blurt came across the speakers. A scared voice, indecipherable, cut up by the intercom channel switching on and off.

‘What the hell...’ Halstrom muttered.

‘Where’s it coming from?’ Kys asked.

‘Just checking,’ said Halstrom, running his fingers over the keys. Another blurt sounded. A frantic scratching and a low moan, broken by the switching click of the system.

‘Someone’s trying to use the intervox. Fumbling with it...’ Kys reasoned.

‘I’ve got the source,’ Halstrom told her. ‘Cabin eight fifteen.’

‘Zael,’ she sighed. ‘I bet the little freak is having another nightmare.’

‘We should—’ Halstrom started to say. But Kys was already striding away towards the hatch.

‘Relax,’ she called over her shoulder. ‘I’ve got it.’

‘DAMN.’

‘What’s the matter, Harlon?’ Ravenor asked. Nayl backed up from the rail, looking round. ‘What?’ Ravenor asked again from Mathuin’s mouth.

‘We’re being scanned again,’ Nayl said. ‘I think someone’s taken an interest.’

Behind them, the pict-opaque field dropped and Preest emerged. The manhound looked up at her as she strode past.

‘Anything useful?’ Ravenor asked her.

‘Indeed. Let’s move.’

Preest stepped up into her carriage and started sliding it forward. Ravenor and Nayl took up the canopy poles and muddled it into position.

As they moved away along the gallery, Unwerth appeared from the booth. ‘Mistress!’ he called out after them. ‘Mistress, are you concumplished that no exhilarated trade may partake between us? Mistress? I am most heartless in my disabusement!’

‘Ignore him,’ Preest said.

‘Fine,’ Nayl said. ‘I could even kill him, if that would help.’

‘No need,’ she whispered. They moved down the stairs into the throng of the salon floor. ‘Master Unwerth has been most useful.’

‘Go on,’ Ravenor said.

‘The *Oktober Country* is here. Unwerth has been pestering everyone, and tried it on with Thekla earlier today. Attempted to get Thekla interested in the useless gee-gaws in Unwerth’s cargo. Thekla gave him the brush off. See, I told you a dunce like Unwerth would be useful.’

‘I’m impressed. What else?’ Ravenor asked, keeping his voice low.

‘I asked him about flects, of course. Unwerth went coy. It’s way out of his league. But he knew the basics. The cartel meets in the second salon. That’s through here. And the man to speak to, according to Unwerth, is a merchant called Akunin.’

‘Akunin? Anything else?’

Preest paused and looked round at Mathuin’s face.

‘You seem to want the world from me, Gideon. Haven’t I just done terribly well?’

‘You have, Cynia. And I’m grateful. But we don’t know anything about this Akunin. Agents of the Throne can’t just march up to people and demand to be cut into the flect trade.’

‘No, they don’t,’ Preest admitted. ‘But rogue traders can. You’ve got the currency orders, Harlon?’

‘Inside my glove, mistress,’ Nayl said.

‘Well, unbutton and make ready. We’re about to do business.’

THE DOOR OF Zael’s cabin was shut, but not locked. Kys slid it open and looked into the dark.

‘Zael? Zael, you freak? What are you playing at?’

She heard a moan from over by the shower closet.

‘Zael? Are you all right?’

Another soft moan.

Kys stepped inside the cabin and reached for the lights. She pressed the activator, but nothing happened. Were they broken? Blown?

Kys advanced into the darkness, her eyes adjusting. She could hear sobbing. The air was warm and damp.

‘Zael? Where in the name of frig are you?’

Something moved in the gloom at the sound of her voice. She flinched, but it was just a body coiled on the floor.

Kys reached down and found Zael. His breathing was fast and shallow. From the smell of it, he’d wet himself.

‘Zael? It’s me. It’s Patience. Get up.’

Zael just twitched.

‘Come on, you trigger. We have to get you cleaned up.’

She picked him up, and steered him towards the shower stall. Zael began to scream and thrash.

Kys slammed his quaking form up against the wall and held it in place.

‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘Don’t make me go in the shower. She’s in there. She’s in there. She’s all bloody and broken.’

‘Who is? Zael, what are you talking about?’

‘Nove.’

‘Who the frig is that?’

‘My sister.’

‘You told me your sister was dead,’ Kys said.

‘She is,’ Zael wept. ‘Go in there and see for yourself.’

Kys let him slump. She walked towards the shower stall. The only light in the cabin was welling out from behind the glass.

Kys realised she had no weapon on her at the same moment she realised there was no reason for her to be armed. The boy had suffered a nightmare. That was the end of it. Why was her heart beating so fast? Why was she so scared?

The fish scales. She thought of them at the very last minute. They were sharp, easy to TK. Mr Halstrom had admired them. She mind-lifted them off her throat stud and hovered them in the air.

This was stupid. The boy had been dreaming. There was nothing in the stall.

She took hold of the door handle. The scales were circling in the air.

She opened the door. Inside the shower stall was—

Nothing.

Kys sagged and breathed out. The scales flew back to her throat and fastened themselves again around the top stud.

‘Shit, Zael. You nearly had me there. I really thought...’

She looked round and saw the boy was crawling towards the open cabin door.

She bounded across to him and grabbed him by the hair. He squealed. ‘Listen! You actually scared me then with your game!’

‘It wasn’t a game!’ Zael whined. ‘It was a message.’

THEY ENTERED THE second salon. It was as busy as the first. At a question from Preest, a Vigilant pointed them up towards a booth on the third gallery.

They climbed the stairs. Almost at once, it was obvious the third gallery was quiet, almost empty.

‘I don’t like it,’ Nayl whispered.

‘Oh, do shut up,’ Preest said.

The booths they were passing were vacant, as if they had been cleared.

A tender hurried past. ‘Akunin?’ Preest called out. ‘Where do I find Master Akunin?’

‘Gone!’ the tender cried, and in another moment, so was she.

‘I think it’s time to split,’ Nayl said.

‘Agreed,’ Ravenor said. ‘While we still can.’

Two figures stepped out of a booth ahead and blocked the gallery. One was a nekulli, armed with a traditional saw-toothed lance. The other was a human in head-to-toe battleplate, polished a deep, silvery blue. He had a falchion in his right hand.

‘About face,’ Ravenor hissed. They turned.

Three more figures stood behind them. One was a man of heavy build with sandy-white hair. To his left stood a kroot with a billhook; to his right, a man in chequered leather armour, wielding a boarding axe.

The man with the sandy-white hair was wearing the camo-armour of a game agent and held a huntsman’s hooksword. He looked familiar, very familiar, to Nayl. For a second Nayl thought it was Feaver Skoh. But this wasn’t the man Nayl had seen in the cave of the Carnivora. Nayl had a good eye for faces. This man was a brother or close kin. A *dynasty of xeno-hunters*, that’s how the Skohs had been described.

‘What is this?’ asked Preest. Ravenor could hear the tremor in her voice.

The game agent smiled. ‘This is the end of the line.’

At the far end of the gallery behind the game agent and his comrades, Ravenor could see Vigilants gathering, forming a cordon. No one was

going to intercede on their behalf. As far as the Order of Vigilants was concerned, this was private business, and would be concluded privately, as per the weapon-laws of the Reach.

+Go.+

At the single word, Nayl and Ravenor/Mathuin began to move. Mistress Preest's aristocratic canopy went clattering over as they up-ended it and drew the weapons concealed within its hollow poles. Stave-swords, with handgrips as long as their thin, straight blades, slithered out into their hands.

Nayl went straight for the game agent, who bellowed and lunged to meet him. Stave-blade encountered hooksword with enough leverage to send the hunter stumbling sideways. But the man in chequered armour and the kroot were right behind their boss. Nayl dummied left out of the swooping downward path of the boarding axe, and smacked the pommel of the stave-sword sideways into the side of the man's head. He cried out and fell down on one knee. Then a scything blow from the kroot's billhook ripped a chunk out of Nayl's quilted coat. The coat was lined with wire-mail, and severed metal loops and scads of downy quilting shredded into the air. Nayl leapt backwards out of range of the kroot's next swing, doubled round to slam-kick the chequered fighter in the face before he could get to his feet again, and came up facing both the kroot and the recovered game agent as they rushed him together.

Ravenor moved the other away, taking on the nekulli and the bounty hunter in the polished blue battleplate. Ravenor's stave-sword parried three vicious strikes from the man's falchion, two off the blade and one off the handgrip base. The nekulli tried to flank him while he was occupied, but Ravenor broke to his left, swinging the stave-sword round in a two-handed, overhead slice that described an arc of almost three hundred and sixty degrees. The nekulli staggered back, wobbled and collapsed, his throat slit.

With a furious exclamation, the man in plate charged in, hacking with his sword. His skill and speed were both considerable. Ravenor parried and

deflected the rain of blows with a fluid, switching combination of single and double-handed grips, rotating the stave-sword like a quarter staff.

Nayl had never tangled with a kroot before, though he'd had sight of them often enough to know what one was. Rumour said they were a mercenary race or a slave-kind, serving some technologically advanced species beyond the Imperial fringes, a species that only a few rogue traders had ever encountered. Despite its size – it towered over him – and its odd, jerky movements, it was formidably fast and seemed to possess unerringly acute senses. With its crude billhook, it managed to smash aside every clean stroke he made against it. It stank terribly of musky, rancid sweat. It would have been match enough for him, but he still had the game agent circling in from the right.

The kroot landed another rending blow that ripped into Nayl's armour coat. He staggered backwards, wrong-footed, and the game agent slammed in, his hooksword striking across the side of Nayl's helmet.

Nayl went sprawling. His buckled helmet bounced off his head across the gallery floor.

'Harlon!' Preest yelled. The mistress was no fighter. She was caught, petrified on her carriage, between the two melees.

The kroot pounced forward onto Nayl and chopped his billhook down. Nayl rolled, leaving the tatters of his coat behind, pinned to the gallery deck. He leaped to his feet in time to meet and block the game agent's sword, turning its blade aside with his blade and bringing the end of the long handgrip round and up hard into the agent's face.

Bone broke, blood spurted, and the agent tumbled backwards with a raging curse. But the kroot was surging in at Nayl from behind.

'Nayl! Nayl!' Preest screamed exasperatedly. She jumped off her ornate carriage and aimed the actuator wand at it. It moved away from stationary with a rapid acceleration, hurtling forward half a metre off the floor.

Nayl began to turn at the sound of Preest's voice. He was stripped down to his bodyglove, and that would not withstand a direct hack from the kroot's razor-sharp weapon.

The unmanned lifter carriage, travelling at nearly thirty kilometres an hour, struck the kroot from behind and bowled him over. He tumbled awkwardly, emitting a strangled squawk, and went sprawling. Nayl came in, plunging his stave-sword down, blade-first, and impaled the thrashing avian to the gallery floor.

The kroot went into death spasms, beak clacking and bony limbs beating the ground. The violent motion ripped the stave-sword out of Nayl's hands.

The man in chequered armour, his face a mask of gore, was back on his feet. He hurled himself at Nayl. The man had lost his boarding axe. His hands clenched around Nayl's throat.

Nayl rolled expertly with the force of impact, going down on his back and propelling the man right over him with his legs. The man crashed over into the nearest booth, destroying the meeting table under his weight.

Nayl was back on his feet in a moment, but now he was unarmed. The game agent came towards him, chopping with his hooksword. Nayl could do nothing except dance out of the way of each swing. Behind him, Preest was still shouting, and Ravenor was trading blow for blow with the battle-plated hunter.

He'd been in worse positions, Nayl thought. But right then, he couldn't bring a single one to mind.

KYS DRAGGED ZAEL out into the companionway. He was muttering, sobbing.

'What do you mean, a message? What's the frigging matter with you?' she snapped.

He murmured something.

'What?'

Zael murmured again.

'I can't hear you! What did you say?'

Zael looked up at her. Blood was dribbling from his nostrils. Kys couldn't remember hitting him. Why was his nose bleeding?

'Nove...'

Wary for a moment, and suddenly terribly calm, she pulled him to his feet.

‘Nove is your sister. I’m not your sister.’

‘I know. She came. She told me.’

‘Told you what?’ Kys asked.

‘It’s a trap,’ he said. ‘It’s a trap.’

‘OH, GOD-EMPEROR,’ said Halstrom abruptly. His tone was enough to make both Thonius and Frauka look up from their latest game.

‘What?’ Thonius asked tersely.

Halstrom began punching the keyboard rapidly.

‘Something’s wrong. I’ve lost contact with the mistress’s landing party.’

Thonius got to his feet. Frauka lit another lho-stick.

‘Bad transmission,’ the blunter said, carelessly.

‘No, no,’ said Halstrom. ‘We’re being blocked.’

‘Are you sure?’ Thonius said, leaning in over Halstrom’s shoulder.

‘No, I’m not,’ Halstrom said. He depressed another few keys. Nothing happened. ‘Bridge controls just went offline,’ he said.

‘That’s impossible!’ Thonius cried. He was nursing his bound-up limb with his free hand, as if it was suddenly giving him pain. ‘You’ve made a mistake.’

‘I assure you, interrogator, I have not,’ Halstrom began. ‘Primary controls are locked out. The entire system is—’

‘Who the hell’s that?’ Thonius said sharply. He was looking at the hololith displays that showed the feeds from the pict-sources overlooking the jetty. A dozen figures were marching down the jetty towards the *Hinterlight*’s airgate. They were uniformly tall, and hidden under hooded storm coats. Four of them were paired off to share the burden of two long, and clearly heavy, pannier crates.

‘Seal the airgate!’ Thonius hissed.

‘I can’t!’ Halstrom replied. ‘We’re locked out!’

The main hatch onto the bridge rattled open behind them. Madsen strode on deck, escorted by her two Ministry colleagues.

‘What is going on?’ she asked.

Halstrom began to rise from his throne. ‘Mamzel Madsen, you’re not permitted up here—’ he began.

‘Oh, that’s right,’ she said. Her arm came up and a snub-nosed automatic pistol was suddenly aiming directly at Halstrom’s forehead.

‘Sit,’ she ordered.

Thonius tried to run. Ahenobarb wheeled around and landed a monstrous punch that sent Thonius tumbling across the deck.

‘Oh, f-!’ started Frauka, dropping his lho-stick. Madsen turned casually and shot him.

The raw boom of the gunshot made Halstrom flinch. Frauka looked down in surprise at the bloodstain soaking out across his shirt, and then toppled backwards over the arm of his seat.

Kinsky, his face a malicious grin, walked up to Halstrom.

‘Sit, she said,’ he laughed.

Halstrom sat, feeling his legs going weak.

‘Y-you can’t do this...’ he mumbled.

Ahenobarb was carrying a kitbag over his shoulder. He dropped it to the deck, unfastened it and pulled out a metal object that looked for all the world like a limpet-mine.

He twisted the setting dial, and a red indicator light began to wink on its surface. It was a psionic nullifier unit, extremely high powered, with a mag-clamp built into its base.

Ahenobarb strode over to Ravenor’s chair, slammed the device down onto its sleek casing, and locked it into place.

PREEST WAS STILL shouting. *Give it a rest, woman*, Nayl thought. *It’s not doing any good*. He leapt sideways from the game agent’s darting sword,

trying to draw him round so he could grab one of the fallen weapons. Even the kroot's frigging billhook would do.

The game-agent was smarter than that. He kept pressing in, driving Nayl towards the gallery wall.

Preest was looking back at Ravenor/Mathuin. The whirling stave-sword was slowly getting the better of the battleplated man's falchion. A swing, a strike, a brittle flare of sparks.

'For Throne's sake, Ravenor!' she yelled. 'We have to—'

Ravenor suddenly staggered. Was he hit? She hadn't seen him take a hit. Why was he—

Ravenor fell flat on his face. Horrified, Preest couldn't rid her mind of the simple cliché... *like a puppet when the strings are cut.*

The game agent aimed the tip of his hooksword at Nayl.

'Time to surrender, I believe,' he said.

'Oh, I can go all night,' Nayl panted.

'I'm sure. But can they?'

Nayl looked around. Ravenor was face down on the ground, still, dead. The man in the polished blue battle-plate now had his falchion to Preest's throat.

At last, she had stopped yelling. Her eyes were wide, blinking, wet with frightened tears, staring right at him.

'Fine,' said Nayl, raising his hands. 'Fine!'

PART THREE

LOST WITH ALL HANDS



ONE

THE BULKHEAD GLOW-GLOBES and recessed lumin panels began to go out. All along the corridor, they dimmed to black. Then the background whir of the atmosphere processors began to fade too. In a few seconds, the air became warm and still.

‘Come with me,’ Kys said.

Zael followed. He didn’t make a sound, as if he didn’t *dare* make a sound. That was good. The last thing she needed was a freaking-out idiot.

She went by touch along through the humid dark. The last psi-taste she had felt had been Ravenor... or rather the sudden, abject lack of Ravenor. Kys hadn’t realised how much she was usually aware of his presence when he was around. Like a tinnitus, like a hum at the back of her skull.

Twenty seconds ago, it had just gone away. As if a switch had been thrown.

Had he suddenly left the *Hinterlight*? That seemed unlikely. He’d have told her, surely? Was he dead? She hoped that was unlikely too. The abrupt loss of contact had been pretty much simultaneous with the sudden cessation of ship systems. Something had gone wrong. And it didn’t take a genius to realise the bridge was not the place to go. *It’s a trap*. Yeah, right.

Groping along in the darkness, feeling for shapes and obstructions with her telekinesis and leading Zael by the hand, Kys suddenly heard a deep, metallic slunk. The ship’s internal mag-locks had just disengaged. Invisibly in the blackness around her, she heard all the doors and hatches open. What next? Was AG going to cut off?

+Thonius?+ she tried.

Nothing.

+Ravenor?+

‘No one’s listening, are they?’ Zael said.

‘I’m not so sure of that,’ Kys said.

They both jumped as emergency power cut in, flooding the hallway with a cold, green auxiliary glow. Secondary air pumps began to wheeze and stir some breeze back into the atmosphere.

Kys blinked to get used to the new, chilly gloom.

It’s a trap.

‘What did you mean?’ she asked Zael. Wide-eyed, he looked at her and shrugged. ‘Nove said it was a trap. We were going into a trap. I think that Kinsky is part of it.’

‘Shit,’ Kys said. If she’d had her way, those bastards would be dead now. Maybe Ravenor would listen to her next time.

Next time. Ho ho.

She wasn’t going to die like this. Not if she could help it. She had one trump up her sleeve.

‘Zael? Zael, what else did your sister tell you?’

The boy began to cry.

‘Stop snivelling, this is important.’

‘She was all mushed up...’ Zael sobbed.

Kys crouched down and – though revolted by the contact – hugged the weeping boy to her. ‘It’s okay, Zael. I mean it. We’re going to be okay. I promise you. Nove scared you, I know, but she only came back to warn you. She wants you to live.’

‘Does she?’

‘Yeah, she does. That’s why she tried so hard to reach you. All those dreams.’

Zael sobbed again.

‘Come on, Zael. Come on. Tell me what else she said. She wants you to know. She wants me to know.’

Zael pulled away from her and wiped his eyes with both hands.

‘It didn’t make any sense. Not much of it.’

‘I’m sure it didn’t,’ Kys said, rising and turning away. ‘God-Emperor, I could use a weapon.’

‘The guy has some.’

‘What?’

‘The guy has lots.’

She glared at him. ‘And the guy is?’

‘Nayl,’ he said. ‘He has lots of weapons in his cabin.’

‘Nove told you this?’

Zael chortled through his sniffs. ‘No, lady. The guy did.’

Nayl’s cabin was a few doors along. Like all the hatches, it was wide open now.

‘Stay here,’ Kys told Zael, and went inside. The cabin smelled of socks and used bodygloves. ‘Wash much, Harlon?’ she said aloud.

The cabin was littered with armour, equipment and junk, not to mention dirty laundry. She picked over a few pieces in the gloom, discarding heavy blades and team-portable infantry support weapons. She didn’t have time to make a thorough search. On the top of a cabinet, she found a Hostec Livery ten-shot; a decent, rugged autopistol. It was wrapped up in its own holster and shoulder rig. Kys strapped it on, buckled the rig about her bust, and drew the auto to check its load. Fat to the max. Nine in the clip and one in the pipe. The loops of the rig supported three more loaded clips.

Kys put the pistol away in its sheath and walked towards the doorway. On the way, she saw a flanged boline lying on a shelf. She scooped it up and, dagger in hand, reached the door.

Zael was cowering in the door frame.

‘Zael?’

‘Yes?’

‘What else did Nove tell you?’

Zael started to cry again. ‘She said... she said they would be coming in through the front door...’

THE AIR GATE was wide open. Feaver Skoh smiled as he marched in off the jetty, pulling back his hood.

‘Let’s go,’ he said to his men. They followed in behind him, stripping off their hoods and storm coats and setting down the crates.

His coat off and his tall, thick-set physique revealed in its armoured glove, Skoh adjusted his microbead earpiece into place. Behind him, his trackers were opening the pannier crates.

‘This is Skoh. Come back.’

A crackle. ‘This is Madsen. Welcome aboard.’

‘What’s the situation, Mamzel Madsen?’ Skoh asked.

Crackle. ‘Bridge is locked down, Skoh. Ravenor is tanked and out of the game. Your brother reports he has all three of the landing party prisoner. Just need you to sweep the decks and round up the crew.’

‘Read that. Numbers?’

One of Skoh’s men slid the custom long-las out of a crate and tossed it to Skoh. Skoh caught it neatly and armed the weapon.

Crackle. ‘We estimate forty-nine. Mostly deck hands and juniors. Be sure to round up the Navigator. We reckon the inquisitor’s staff members Kys and Swole are both aboard. Both female. Kys is a telekine. Swole is an acrobat. Neither should give you much trouble.’

‘Got that, Madsen. Piece of cake. Lock up the gate and move us off. Skoh out.’

Skoh looked round at his eleven-man team. They were all game hunters, experienced men from Skoh’s family business. All of them, now the storm coats had been shed, were revealed to be thick-set brutes in various types of camo-armour. Some carried long-las, some autocannons. All of them, like their master, festooned their armour with trophy teeth and scalps.

The outer hatch of the airgate slammed shut behind them. Then the inner skin closed.

‘Let’s move,’ said Skoh, leading them off into the *Hinterlight*’s interior.

Hidden behind a bulkhead, Kys and Zael watched them thunder past
'Right, not that way...' she said.

'No,' SAID ELMAN Halstrom.

'No?' echoed Lusinda Madsen. She poked her weapon against the side of Halstrom's temple and cocked it.

'I think I was clear. I will not obey your orders.'

'Really? Look, Mr Halstrom... you did see what I did to Frauka?'

'Vividly. But I will not assist you.'

Madsen smiled. 'You really don't have much of a choice, Halstrom. It's been a lovely long voyage, long enough for me to penetrate your ship's systems and encode them to my countermand. It's not been easy, I grant you that. Your mistress, and Ravenor... have made the *Hinterlight*'s systems ingeniously complex. But that's why the Ministry employs me. I can shut the ship down, I can start it up. Now sit down, Halstrom, and pilot this thing.'

'No,' Halstrom said.

Madsen looked across at Kinsky.

'Do it.'

Kinsky swayed and fell. Ahenobarb caught him before he hit the deck and lowered him into the second helmsman's throne.

Halstrom stiffened suddenly, and whimpered. Then he sat down in the command throne and started punching keys. The main systems came back to life.

'Commencing undock procedure,' he said, in a curiously flat voice.
'Thrusters live. Helm active. Disengaging airgate clamps.'

'Soon as we're clear,' Madsen said, 'head for the sun.'

'ARE YOU ALL right, Gideon?' Preest whispered.

Mathuin glanced round at her. He was still very woozy, leaning against the gallery wall just to remain upright.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘But it’s Zeph. Ravenor’s not waring me any more. He just... vanished. Like he was torn out of me. Never known a ride to be that tough.’

‘Shut up!’ instructed the bounty hunter in the blue battleplate. His angular visor was still closed, and his voice came out as a vox-distort through a helmet speaker. He finished securing the set of mag-cuffs around Nayl’s wrists. Mathuin and Preest were already bound.

The man in the chequered leather armour stood nearby, watching them. His broken nose was still bleeding, and his face was beginning to swell and discolour. He kept looking venomously at Nayl.

Nearby, the game agent was talking to two Vigilants as more of the Order removed the bodies. The agent was making some kind of formal representation to excuse the fight and express appreciation for the Vigilants’ tolerance.

He handed over a bag of coins to pay for material damages. The Vigilants bowed briefly and began to disperse, taking the bodies with them. Tenders arrived to scrub the floor.

The game agent walked over to join his comrades and the trio of captives. He was talking on a compact vox.

‘It’s Skoh,’ they heard him say. ‘Power up, we’re coming down.’

‘Understood.’

The game agent eyed the three of them. ‘They all secure, Verlayn?’

‘Yes,’ replied the man in blue armour, making a tilting nod with his sharp-featured helm.

‘You’ve frisked them too? No multi-keys, hold-outs, concealed?’

‘I’ve frisked them, Skoh,’ Verlayn replied, sounding a little piqued that his expertise was being questioned.

‘Yeah, well it pays to be careful. Those two—’ Skoh indicated Mathuin and Nayl, ‘in particular.’

‘When the time comes,’ the man in chequered armour growled, ‘he’s mine,’ He was still staring at Nayl.

‘We’ll see about that, Gorgi,’ Skoh said.

‘Promise it, Fernan! Bastard broke my face!’

‘I said we’ll see,’ replied Fernan Skoh firmly. ‘It’s my brother’s call. You ask him. He might give you the bastard as a treat. Now let’s start moving.’

Verlayn gestured with his blade, and the prisoners began to walk. Skoh and Gorgi fell in step behind them.

THEY WALKED THEM along to the far end of the emptied gallery, and then down a main stair onto a more populated level. Heads turned to watch them go by, but they were given a wide berth.

From a gallery on the far side of the salon, Kara got a good view of them. She hurried along the rail, moving on a parallel course, keeping them in sight. They reached another stairhead, and began to descend again.

Kara stepped back from the rail. She tried her compact vox again, but the channel was dead. Something had happened to the ship too.

She slipped on through the crowd, barely breaking step to lift a folded storm coat off a booth bench as she went by. The owner, deep into negotiation with a business partner and even deeper into a bottle of joiliq, didn’t even notice it go.

Pulling the coat on, Kara reached the nearest staircase and hurried down through the crowd as fast as she dared without drawing attention to herself.

THE DECK PLATING shivered again. Then another deep boom rolled through the ship.

‘We’re moving,’ Zael muttered.

‘Yeah, we are.’

‘Was that like that warp thing? Are we at warp?’

‘Translation? No,’ said Kys. Way too early. That’s mag-locks uncoupling. Mooring lines detaching. We’re barely rolling yet.’

‘What are we going to do?’ Zael asked.

Now that was a frigging good question.

She started to speak, but another loud boom echoed down the companionway.

‘More mag-locks?’ Zael asked hopefully.

‘No,’ she said, grabbing him by the wrist and starting to run. ‘That was gunfire.’

More ominous echoes resounded behind them. They ran down the hallway, across a through-deck junction, and on into the ship’s servitor bay. It was a large, long chamber with an oily, stained floor. Along each wall, dormant servitors rested in restraining cradles, most of them wired up to recharge transformers in the bulkheads behind them. In the cold green half-light, the rows of frozen, semi-human, semi-augmetic slave units seemed eerie and macabre. They’d all been shut down at a primary level. Red deactivation runes shone on every cradle. Kys and the boy edged into the chamber. Like the double blast hatch they had entered through, the exit at the far end was locked open. Kys felt her way forward with her telekinesis, sensing the sidebays full of servicing units and tool racks, the dangling hooks and clamps of the overhead maintenance crane-tracks. Hanging chains swung gently in the slight through-breeze.

She felt – then heard – footsteps coming up behind them, running fast. Somehow, Zael seemed to sense them even before Kys, and he pulled at her hand. They moved to the side, off the open deck space in the middle of the chamber, and slid in between cradle racks until they were crouched and hidden in the deep shadows between a heavy monotask unit and the chamber wall.+Not a sound,+ she nudged. Zael nodded.

The ringing footsteps came closer and from their hiding place they watched as a man ran into the servitor bay. Kys recognised him. It was one of the junior enginarium adepts... Soben, was it? Sarben?

He was out of breath and very agitated. He glanced about frantically, and then clambered in behind the servitor cradles on the far side of the bay.

Kys wanted to call out to him... even mind-nudge... but there was no time.

Making a low buzz like an angry insect, a cyber-drone flew in through the hatchway. It was travelling at head-height, and as soon as it was in the bay, it decelerated and began to hover gently along, as if sniffing the air.

The drone was small. It had been built into the polished skull of some deer or grazer. The red glow of motion-tracker systems shone from its eye sockets. Under the base of the occipital bone, the drone's tiny lift motor whirred and pulsed.

One of Skoh's huntsmen came into the bay after it. Despite his heavy boots and thick camo-armour, he made no sound. He carried a large calibre autorifle in a confident, assured grip.

The drone drifted ahead of him, whirring and cycling. The hunter, his weapon braced in one hand, bent down and began peering under the servitor cradles near the hatch.

The drone passed the place where the adept had hidden himself and floated on, about to draw level with Kys and Zael. She felt the boy go rigid with fear.

Suddenly, the drone turned and snapped backwards, accelerating round in a wide arc. The hunter was up and running forward. The drone flew in behind the cradles on the far side of the bay and locked onto the cowering crewman.

The adept started to run, breaking cover to flee along the space between the cradles and the wall. The drone zoomed after him. Soben let out a cry and plunged out between two hoist cradles into the open to escape it.

The autogun boomed. Soben flew backwards through the air with a violent lurch and smashed down onto the decking.

The hunter approached the body. His drone re-emerged and flew along at his side. The adept was dead, but the hunter put another round through his head, point blank, just to be sure. Like a game-kill.

The calculated barbarity of the second shot made Zael wince involuntarily.

The drone immediately rotated in mid-air and stared its dull red stare right in their direction.

Instinctively, Kys lashed out with her telekinesis and swung together several of the hooks and lifting chains dangling from the ceiling.

The drone switched round again at the sound, and the hunter wheeled, firing another shot up into the roofspace. He stood for a moment, weapon still aimed, watching the chains and clamps raiding and swinging.

Then he lowered his weapon and headed out through the hatch with the drone at his shoulder.

FERNAN SKOH LED his captives out into an echoing stone vault in the lower levels of the Reach bastion. It was one of the hangar docks for shuttles and lifters ferrying to and fro from the starships anchored out over the Lagoon. A big, dirty-black bulk lifter sat on the apron, its thrust-drive already lit. The side ramp was open.

The mouth of the vault was open to space. Void-shields kept the atmosphere in, but the huge archway afforded them all a panoramic view out over the docks and quays towards the luminous white expanse of the Lagoon.

Outside, the sky was rippling with flame. Though not yet at its full might, the solar violence of Firetide was startling to behold.

‘Emperor damn it...’ Preest said suddenly.

‘Shut up!’ Verlayn spat.

Nayl and Mathuin followed Preest’s gaze and saw what she had seen. Several kilometres away to their west, a star-ship was gently clearing its void-dock as it departed the Reach.

It was unmistakably the *Hinterlight*.

‘On board, now,’ Skoh ordered, and pushed them up the ramp.

Kara watched them as they boarded the lifter. A hooter was sounding, indicating the hangar vault should be cleared promptly. Interior hatches and field-protected doorways were already sealing. Processors were beginning to pump the air out. In less than five minutes, the void shields would disengage and open the vault to space, allowing the lifter to take off.

KARA WATCHED THE last of the hangar personnel filing out. If she remained in the vault, she would die. But this was her last chance to stay in the game. This was quite possibly everybody's last chance.

Though the hefty bulk lifter occupied the main space of the vault, ancient stone-cut stairs and ramps led up to secondary platform blocks overhead where small craft were berthed. She ran up four flights, and arrived on a wide stone shelf near the roof of the vault where two compact prospector pods were seated in magnetic clamps as they underwent automated refuelling from an energy bowser bolted to the chamber wall. Kara went to the edge of the shelf. She could already feel the air thinning and the pressure dropping. Below her, the lifter hulk was powering its thrusters up to ready. Its side ramp had sealed.

Kara ran to one of the pods and wrenched the hatch open. Nothing. She tried the other. In a storage compartment behind the operator's seat, she found a shabby old vac-suit, worn and battered. The breather unit switched on into life at the second try. Its luminous dial showed about thirty per cent capacity. What was that? An hour? Ninety minutes if the suit had been well maintained. *Well maintained, my arse*, Kara thought. It clearly hadn't. Maybe the unit would give her as little as thirty minutes. Which wouldn't be anything like enough.

There wasn't even a way of telling if the suit had been compromised. Maybe it had been slung behind the seat because it had a tear or a puncture. Or a holed inner glove. Or a perforated throat seal. Or a faulty pump. Or bled-to-hopeless batteries.

Kara stripped off her borrowed storm coat and began unfastening the suit's corroded side clasps. She'd soon find out.

THE BUZZER SOUNDED one last time, barely audible over the mounting drone of the bulk lifter's engines. Deck lamps around the apron's edge were pulsing and flashing.

Then the vault's void-shields disengaged. There was a great swirl of dust as the vault's vestigial atmosphere rushed out, taking all sound with it.

Suddenly silent, its thruster jets blazing, the bulk lifter rose up off the stone apron and began to climb slowly, sedately out of the vault.

Pitted and rusted, the rough surfaces of its upper hull slid slowly past under the stone shelf.

A single figure, the firelight flashing off its visor for a second, leapt off the shelf and fell away, arms outstretched, tiny, towards the massive vehicle moving out below.



TWO

THE VIOLENT COMBUSTIONS and flares of Firetide lit up the whole sky as if the entire galaxy was burning. The flickering brilliance cast strange, jumping shadows from the bastion and its surrounding peaks out across the dust of the Lagoon, which now looked yellow in the changing light.

Still only moving at a low, coasting speed, the *Hinterlight* moved well clear of the Reach's void-dock area and soared out over the brilliance of the Lagoon, passing other ships resting at low-anchor. Astern, but moving much faster and accelerating on seventy-five per cent thrust, the bulk lifter left the hangar in the cliff-like wall of the bastion and gave chase. The distance between the vessels began to close.

On the *Hinterlight's* bridge, Madsen settled into the primary helm position beside the central command throne from which Halstrom was running the ship. A particularly brilliant solar surge caused the main pict-source displays to distort and fizzle. Madsen winced at the glare and adjusted down the display resolution to dim the effects. 'All right?' she asked Halstrom.

Halstrom's brow was furrowed, as if he was concentrating hard. Every few moments the muscles of his face gave a tic or a little spasm. 'Kinsky?' she repeated. 'Everything all right?'

'Yes,' Halstrom's voice replied, flat and dead. 'He's fighting me, that's all. Every step of the way.' Kinsky's body lay limp in the chair of the secondary helm station behind them. An unfinished game of regicide glowed on that station's display screen.

Kinsky's mind was inside Halstrom's, forcing the *Hinterlight's* first officer to pilot the vessel. Kinsky was a terribly powerful active psyker, but he had nothing like Ravenor's finesse or training. He could not ware

subjects, he'd never developed the technique. But he could get inside their heads, and essentially hijack them. None of Madsen's team had decent shipmastering skills, so Kinsky was coercing Halstrom to use his expertise. It was difficult. Halstrom was resisting. Kinsky couldn't apply too much pressure for fear of burning out the shipman's mind altogether. It was a frustratingly difficult, painstaking process. Frustrating for Mamzel Madsen too. She was a first class tech-adept and code writer, but she had zero helm training. She was beginning to wish they'd brought a pilot too. She had assumed that a gun to the head of Halstrom or Preest would be incentive enough when the time came. Now just driving the *Hinterlight* was occupying all of Kinsky's mind, when he could be put to good use elsewhere.

Ahenobarb stood behind Kinsky's recumbent form, watching over him as he always did. Every now and then he cast a look in the direction of Thonius. Thonius had recovered consciousness but remained where he had fallen, gazing wretchedly at the interlopers. A huge bruise from Ahenobarb's fist blotched the right side of his face.

Thonius was desperate to act, but quite at a loss to know how. He was unarmed and weak, and the fall had badly jarred his damaged arm. Pain was throbbing through it so acutely he had to keep blinking tears away. Every time he moved even slightly, Ahenobarb or Madsen looked his way. He doubted he'd even manage to sit up without them noticing. And if he did...

Thonius looked at Frauka, flat on his back on the deck beside Kinsky's chair. The blood stain across the front of his shirt was huge and dark, and a pool of blood was spreading wide across the deck under his torso. Frauka had never been a friend really, but he'd been alright. No one deserved that kind of ruthless demise.

For the umpteenth time, Thonius cast a look at Ravenor's inert chair. He gazed at the psionic nullifier unit mag-clamped like a giant barnacle to the front of the chair's casing, wishing it, willing it to fall off or deactivate. Mentally, he turned over every possible idea he could think of for

removing the nullifier. Every scenario ended with him dead on the bridge floor.

Aching pain was weakening him. Thonius began to wonder if he was simply not brave enough. He'd always thought of himself as brave, until the heathen moot on Flint. Look how bravery had abandoned him there. He fought off the memory. He was an agent of the Throne. Bravery was expected of him. Maybe he should just get up and have a go, damn the consequences.

Then he thought of Halstrom. Halstrom had been brave. He'd refused to cooperate, even with Madsen's gun at his head. And look how much good his bravery had accomplished.

A vox-chime sounded, and Madsen looked to her console.

'*Hinterlight*, go,' she said.

'Lifter. We're inbound for rendezvous. Request you keep your course and speed and open your hangar.'

'Stand by, lifter,' Madsen said. She looked over at Halstrom. 'You hear that?'

'Yes,' said Kinsky via Halstrom's leaden, weighted voice. His fingers moved heavily across the command console keys. 'I'll hold this vector steady. Open the port hangar and light the guide paths.'

'Good,' Madsen said. She turned back to her console and tapped in a series of instructions. 'Lifter? This is *Hinterlight*.'

'Read you, *Hinterlight*.'

'Port hangar is opening. Link your transponder to the guide signal and get aboard. Make it quick, please.'

'Understood,' the vox answered, distorting a little in time to a brighter than average solar flare outside. 'You've got them all?' Madsen asked. 'All three.'

'Soon as you're aboard, have them taken to the light cargo holds on four.'

'Light cargo holds on deck four, got it.'

'And get the lifter prepped for turnaround. We're on a clock here.'

‘Understood, *Hinterlight*. Lifter out.’

Madsen closed the channel and lit up an auspex display that showed a small, blinking rune closing in on the port side of the larger icon that represented the *Hinterlight*.

‘They’re coming in,’ she said.

‘I know,’ Halstrom said, with effort.

There was another vox-chime, but it was from the internal intercom system.

‘Madsen? It’s Skoh. We’ve finished our sweep. Got most of them.’

What does “most of them” mean, Mr Skoh?’ Madsen replied, acidly.

‘Forty-six persons, including the Navigator. No sign of the females you mentioned.’

‘I’m coming down,’ Madsen said. She got to her feet and looked at Ahenobarb. ‘Watch him,’ she ordered, indicating both Kinsky and Halstrom.

‘Always,’ the giant answered.

Madsen looked at Thonius and gestured with her pistol. ‘On your feet, interrogator. Time to join the others.’

Thonius got up slowly. It was a painful process.

‘Madsen?’ Halstrom asked without looking round. He was still staring intently at the readout displays, his fingers moving with over-careful precision on the controls.

‘What?’

‘Take him with you,’ Halstrom replied, gesturing at Ravenor’s chair with one hand. ‘I don’t want him here. Makes me uneasy.’

‘Over here,’ Madsen snarled at Thonius. He limped over. ‘Disengage him and bring him.’

Thonius nodded. He crouched down and disconnected the psi-booster cables from Ravenor’s chair and closed the access ports. Then he reached under the chair body and deactivated the mag-clamps that held it fast to

the deck. Even with one hand, it wasn't difficult to push the chair around on its frictionless grav plates.

For a moment, Thonius looked at the nullifier clamped to the chair's body. It was within reach. How did it detach? Could he do it with one hand, with a simple tug? Could he do it before they realised? Was he brave enough?

'Don't even think about it,' Madsen said. She was staring at him. Mocking. She knew exactly how brave he was.

And that was not remotely enough.

THE HOLD SPACE of the bulk lifter was a battered, worn, poorly-lit box of metal, its floor and walls scarred and dented by centuries of cargo handling. Nayl, Mathuin and Preest sat in one corner against the wall in a silent huddle, watched over by Verlayn and Gorgi. Free from the weapon restrictions of Bonner's Reach, Verlayn was covering them with a laspistol, and Gorgi had an autosnub. Gorgi had stopped fiddling with his damaged face, and was now scrubbing petulantly at the bloodstains down the front of his chequered armour with a cloth. 'Here's an idea... give it a rest,' said Verlayn from behind his helmet.

'Here's another... shut the frig up,' Gorgi replied.

In the aft portion of the hold, blast hatches led through to the drive chambers. Forward, a flight of metal-mesh steps led up to an open hatch through which they could just see a cockpit area, lit by instrumentation. There were two flight crewmen up there, and Fernan Skoh sat at the top of the steps behind them, loading a bolt pistol.

The ride was rough. Every few seconds, the lifter lurched or shivered. Fragments of metal junk and pieces of cargo packing rolled and skittered back and forth across the oil-stained hold floor.

'Coming up on it now, Fernan,' Nayl heard one of the flight crew call.

Skoh got up and leaned in through the flight deck hatch. He'd holstered his bolt pistol and was holding on to the hatch frame with both hands as the buffeting and jarring increased.

‘We’re riding something’s mag-stream,’ Preest whispered to Nayl.

‘Shut the frig up,’ Gorgi said, aiming his snub at her.

Skoh was talking to the flight crew. Nayl strained to hear.

‘...as soon as we’re down. You understand? Full spec turnaround and repower. I want this bird ready to fly again in thirty minutes.’

‘No problem,’ said one of the crewmen.

‘Better not be,’ said Skoh, turning and sitting down again on the top step.

‘This is our ticket out when that hulk starts its death dive.’

THE BLAZE OF Firetide was now approaching its maximum burn. The whole sky was writhing with incandescent flame patterns and scorching blooms of light.

Running lights blinking, the bulk lifter edged in. It was a big craft, but entirely dwarfed by the spaceship it was closing upon. Moving sedately, the *Hinterlight* was a colossal form ahead of it.

Beneath them, the white dust of the Lagoon displayed their comparative shadows, big and small, both jumping and twisting in the light of the overhead storm. The crater rim was coming up, a vast, jagged curtain of sheer black mountains. At their current rate, they would clear the Lagoon in four minutes.

The bulk lifter sped in closer, dropping thrust to match the *Hinterlight*’s pace. The massive void-hatches of the *Hinterlight*’s port hangar bay were open, and strobing guide lights lit up the gaping mouth.

Expertly, the bulk lifter shimmied in closer, and then banked around on a flurry of attitude jets, hard burning, and entered the bay.

The void-doors began to shut.

The *Hinterlight* turned its nose and began to climb in a slow, westward turn. It passed over the ramparts of the crater wall, and then its massive thrust-tunnels fired in a great sheet of light and it began to power up and away into the illuminated heavens.

‘WE’RE HEADING INTO space,’ Zael said.

Kys stopped and turned round to look at him. ‘How could you know that?’ she asked. Until less than a month before, the boy had never even seen a spaceship. He didn’t understand how they worked. He couldn’t recognise the tremor of translation if it jumped up and bit him.

‘I just know,’ he said. He tapped his forehead.

‘Nove tell you?’

He shuddered. ‘No. Well, maybe. Not in person. I just keep hearing things.’

‘Like what?’ Kys asked.

‘Like... gravity well exit.’

How would he know a phrase like that, Kys wondered? She waved him on. The low-deck corridor ahead was gloomy and creaking as the ship’s mighty frame responded to the vast influence of gravity.

‘Where are we going?’ Zael asked.

‘Enginarium,’ she replied. ‘If we can’t stop the bastards taking this ship, we can maybe stop them using it.’

Kys raised the pistol she’d borrowed from Nayl’s cabin and led the way down the darkened tunnel.

AHENOBARB KNELT DOWN and stroked Kinsky’s limp face. He produced a cloth from his belt and dabbed away the perspiration from his partner’s brow.

‘You’re sweating,’ he remarked.

‘The bastard’s making it hard for me,’ Halstrom replied from the throne behind Ahenobarb. ‘Once we’re done with this, I’ll kill the frigger myself.’

‘But you’re okay?’ Ahenobarb asked. He could hear Halstrom’s fingers clattering over the main command controls. ‘Yes. We’re clear now. Commencing climb into gravity well exit.’

THE LIGHT CARGO holds were towards the bow section of deck four. The *Hinterlight* had two principal holds, a legacy to its days as a trader, to

accommodate gross cargo. But often, a free trader was required to ship smaller masses of high-cost goods – fine wines, artworks, precious stones. The small cargo holds were built for that purpose, a series of armoured chambers that could be locked off, sealed and, if necessary, environment controlled individually.

Feaver Skoh's hunters had rounded the crew of the *Hinterlight* into small cargo five. The entry hatch was still open, and two of the huntsmen stood sentry at the doorway. Inside, thirty-eight terrified personnel were huddled together.

Skoh himself was standing in the gangway outside when Madsen arrived. The rest of his gang loitered around, leaning against walls, smoking lhos, chatting. Skoh was talking to Duboe. He'd just released the cavae master from the *Hinterlight*'s holding cells.

Duboe was thin and filthy. There was a wild look in his eyes, and he was compulsively rubbing his wrists, free from their shackles for the first time in a long while.

They looked round as Madsen approached. She was walking behind Thonius, who was pushing Ravenor's chair. Thonius was sweating and pale. Though frictionless, the chair had been hard to manoeuvre and direct with just one hand after all. He was shaking and exhausted.

Duboe slid past Skoh and strode towards Madsen.

'You bitch!' he yelled into her face. 'You frigging bitch! You knucked up my mind!'

Madsen recoiled with distaste from Duboe's wretched breath.

'Get over it, Mr Duboe,' she admonished. 'It was necessary.'

'Necessary? Frigging necessary?'

'That's enough, Duboe...' Skoh said as he approached.

'No!' Duboe cried. 'Bad enough that this freak mind-frigged me every day!' He kicked the side of Ravenor's inert chair. Thonius winced. 'No, she and Kinsky came at me too. They fried my mind, Skoh! Fried my frigging mind!'

Skoh looked at Madsen. She met his stare. 'You know what's at stake here, Mr Skoh. We tolerate your little commerce on the side. Greedy? Maybe... frig, we pay you handsomely enough. But I guess the fleets are too choice an income source for the likes of you to ignore.'

'The likes of me?' Skoh said quietly. Madsen gave him a withering look. 'Contract thirteen is all that matters. We pay you well for your services. More than enough to cover the risks involved.'

'The risks are great, Mamzel,' Skoh said. 'Running a Fleet blockade...'

'Oh, tell it to someone who cares!' Madsen snapped. 'We're only here today, in this fix, because your hungry little sideline in fleets almost gave the game away!'

Skoh shrugged and looked at the deck. Madsen turned to face the edgy Duboe. 'And for what it's worth, Mr Duboe... of course we screwed with your mind. Yours, Siskind's, every other bastard who mattered. Those were my orders, that's what I ensured Kinsky did. We had to make sure none of you idiots gave the game away to the frigging Inquisition. Ravenor is a bastard, a blade-sharp bastard. Any hint of the truth, and he'd have been on us. We had to be sure that anything he learned from mind-searches just drove him further and further into this trap.' Duboe glowered at her, but nodded. 'No one wants the frigging Inquisition on his back,' Skoh conceded. He smiled at Madsen. 'And my congratulations, Mamzel. It's a fine trap you've devised, beautifully executed. Taking the bastard's team down on Eustis would have created a terrible problem. Questions, follow-up investigations... But if his ship goes missing out here, out in Lucky Space, lost with all hands...'

'I'm glad you appreciate the finer points,' Madsen said.

'You still frigged up my mind,' growled Duboe.

Skoh turned and slammed Duboe up against the wall.

'Live with it,' Skoh said into Duboe's face 'If you'd run your end of the op better, this would never had been necessary.'

Skoh looked over at Thonius and the chair.

'Who's that?' he asked.

‘Ravenor himself,’ Madsen replied. ‘And one of his lackeys.’

Skoh walked over to Ravenor’s chair. He knelt down and embraced its hull, laying his head against it. ‘You hear me? You hear me in there, you little crippled bastard? You’ve cost us plenty. You’re going to die for that. You and all your frigging crew. All your friends. You’re going to die in the heart of the local sun. And when it happens, they’re all going to be as helpless and frigging useless as you.’

He rose, and waved over two of his hunters. ‘Put the cripple in a hold all on his own,’ he said. The hunters began to steer Ravenor’s chair down the gangway into one of the empty holds. Skoh grabbed Thonius by the shoulder. ‘You’re going in with the others,’ he said, and frog-marched him into small cargo five.

He kicked Thonius as they reached the door, and Thonius went sprawling onto the small hold’s deck. He screamed in pain. Madsen joined Skoh at the hatchway. ‘Forty-six, you reckon?’ she asked. ‘All told, Mamzel Madsen. Eight fatalities during the sweep. Some knucks don’t know when it’s a good idea to surrender.’

Madsen scanned the miserable faces in the hold. ‘I don’t see Kys or Swole. Or, for that matter, the boy.’

‘We weren’t told about a boy,’ Skoh said.

‘A kid, from Eustis Majoris. His name’s Zael. He’s not here either.’

‘The kills my team made were all adult males...’ Skoh began.

‘I thought you were meant to be expert huntsmen,’ Madsen mocked. ‘There are two adult females and a kid loose somewhere on this ship.’

Skoh flinched slightly, his professional pride wounded. He called his men close in a huddle. ‘Munchs, Dreko – Guard the prisoners here. The rest of you... section this ship, deck by deck, tight-hunt order. Two women, one boy. I’ll give a bonus payment for each head you bring me.’

The nine game hunters nodded and hurried away down the hall. Madsen could hear the zip of las-weapons charging up and the whirr of cyberdrones being launched.

Madsen looked up at Skoh. 'By the way, you're brother's coming aboard just now.'

'He got the others?'

'All three,' Madsen smiled. 'Trap's closed.'

'MR THONIUS? MR Thonius?'

The voice penetrated Carl's dream. It had been a nice dream. He'd been in an up-hive outfitters on Thracian Primaris, being measured for a suit of the most gorgeous plum tarnsey. But the bloody tailors had kept sticking their pins into his right arm.

Stab, stab, stab...

He woke up. Faces peered down at him. One of them was the medicae, Zarjaran.

Thonius woke up fast. He was in the cell. He was a prisoner.

Zarjaran examined his arm. 'You've burst some stitches, Mr Thonius,' he said. 'There is some weeping around the wound, and some tissue tearing.'

Thonius looked around. He saw Magnus, the second helmsman; Cliesters, the enginarium chief; Kobax from the ship's galley; the Navigator Twu, wrapped in a blanket.

They were all frightened. Them and all the others. Scared to death.

They were staring at him because he was the only member of Ravenor's personal cadre to be captured with them.

They were expecting something of him. They were expecting something ridiculous. Like he'd get them out. Like he'd somehow be able to do something amazing and free them all.

'Help me up,' Thonius said. Zarjaran hoisted him a little.

Thonius looked at the open hatchway of the hold. Two of Skoh's huntsmen stood in the frame of it, weapons ready.

What kind of frigging miracle did these people want from him?

He wasn't that brave. He'd never been mat brave. He was Carl Thonius. He wasn't a hero at all.

THE PALL OF vapour filling the port hangar began to disperse, and the lumen strips on the interior hatches went green, indicating atmospheric equalisation. The whine of the bulk lifter's thrust drive shrank away into the silence of system shut down.

On the top of the battered lifter, Kara Swole raised her head and slowly unwrapped her arms from around the bars of a lateral stanchion which she'd been clinging on to for the duration of the flight.

She was shaking badly. The old vacsuit had done its job, but only barely. Its insulating sub-layer was poor, and her core temperature had dropped sharply. With trembling fingers, she unsealed the helmet and took it off, her teeth chattering. Her cheeks and lips felt raw with cold.

From below, she heard the lock mechanism disarm on the lifter's side ramp. She pulled off the rest of the threadbare old suit as quickly as she could. There was no time to warm up, no time to feel sorry for herself.

The compact rucksack she'd been carrying ever since emerging from the crate in the kitchens of the Reach was still with her – she'd strapped it around her belly and fastened the baggy vacsuit up over it. Kneeling, her hand still shaking, she put the rucksack down and peeled open the seam-seal. Inside it, side by side, was a matched brace of Tronsvasse autopistols. She'd been carrying them concealed as a back-up for Nayl's team, though given the brutal efficiency of the Vigilants she was glad she hadn't been forced to produce one. She was fond of her hands.

Even if they were shaking like hell now.

She slipped the pistols out and checked the loads. Each handgrip held a clip of thirty caseless rounds.

Below her, with a grating rumble, the lifter's side ramp began to unfold.

First out were two men in dingy flightsuits. They hurried into view on the hangar deck and made their way over to the banks of crew service machinery built into the hangar wall to begin a turnaround prep for the lifter. It seemed to Kara that the lifter wasn't intending to stay long.

'Let's go,' Fernan Skoh said with a nod of his head. Gorgi and Verlayn flanked the three prisoners as they came down the ramp, Skoh at their

heels.

‘Any time now,’ Gorgi muttered to Nayl. ‘Soon as Skoh’s brother gives me the nod, I’m going to mess you up bad.’

‘Really?’ said Nayl, without interest.

‘Shut up, Gorgi,’ Verlayn said.

‘You shut up!’ Gorgi said. ‘I’m gonna take my time and mess this one up real nasty for what he done to my face.’

‘What?’ asked Nayl. ‘Improved it?’

‘You bastard!’ Gorgi barked.

‘Shut up, Gorgi,’ Skoh said from behind.

‘Yeah, shut up, Gorgi,’ Nayl agreed.

Gorgi snapped. He lashed out with his left hand and smacked Nayl hard across the face.

‘Gorgi!’ Skoh snarled.

But the man already had his autosnub pressed to Nayl’s forehead.

‘You frigger!’ he screamed. Two shots rang out, their sounds magnified by the large chamber. Gorgi’s head broke apart in a pink mist and he tumbled backwards like he’d been yanked on a chain.

‘Emperor!’ Preest shrilled in dismay.

More shots rained down from high above them. Most were aimed at Verlayn, and they dented his battleplate with enough force to knock him down.

Nayl looked round. Up on the back of the lifter Kara Swole was unloading serious fire, an auto in each hand. Mathuin grabbed Preest and pulled her down to shield her. Sprawled, but far from dead, Verlayn blazed back at Kara with his laspistol. Fernan Skoh broke and ran back under the lifter, out of the field of fire. His hands still cuffed, Nayl threw himself after Skoh. He caught up with him beside the lifter’s rear port landing gear and felled him from behind with a two-handed smash, his fingers laced together. Skoh went down, and his bolt pistol skittered away across the metal decking.

Firing sideways with both autos, Kara leapt along the length of the lifter's top-side as Verlayn's desperate las-shots sparked and careened off the bodywork around her. The two flight crew over by the hangar wall came running back, pulling autosnubs and adding to the hail of fire coming Kara's way.

Nayl hit Skoh with both fists again, but Skoh rolled and kicked out, snapping Nayl's legs away. With his hands bound, he couldn't compensate his balance and fell badly. Then Skoh was on him, kicking him and bending down to jab in punches. Cursing, Nayl grabbed Skoh's torso armour with his cuffed hands and threw Skoh headfirst over him.

Shots dented the hull plating around Kara, and one sliced through the fabric of her bodysuit on her left thigh. Another, one of Verlayn's las-rounds, zipped past less than a hand's breadth from her cheek. With a squeal of alarm, she ducked and widened her arms, firing the weapon in her left hand at Verlayn, and the one in her right at the crewmen. The latter jerked and tumbled over dead. The decking beside Verlayn punctured and holed.

Nayl scrambled up, but the cuffs made him clumsy and Skoh was faster. The game agent threw a punch into Nayl's face that dropped him again, momentarily unconscious. Skoh bent down and picked up his bolt pistol.

The clips in each of Kara's guns were nearly spent. The firefight had only been running for a scant fifteen seconds since the first shot, though it felt like an eternity. She'd been really hosing. She took her fingers off the triggers for a split-second, ignoring the rounds exploding all around her, and took aim to make her last few loads count. She fired the left handgun, a single shot at Verlayn. His polished blue armour had withstood the caseless punishment, but now she hit the left eyepiece of the battleplate's visor. Verlayn's helmet snapped back and he rolled over. Then she turned both guns on the remaining crewman and blew him apart.

'Zeph!' she yelled, and hurled one of her autos into the air towards him.

Nayl came round just as Skoh put a boot on the chain of his cuffs and pinned his arms to the ground. Skoh pressed the muzzle of the bolt pistol

into Nayl's left eye socket.

Leaping up off Preest, Mathuin reached upwards with his cuffed hands and caught the spinning autopistol by the grip. He swung it round and shot Fernan Skoh through the heart from twenty metres. Skoh lurched backwards off Nayl, slammed into the lifter's landing leg, and fell on his face.

'Holy frigging Throne...' Preest murmured, dazed and terrified.

Mathuin looked down at the weapon he held. The clip was out. That shot had been the last one in the mag. 'Indeed,' he agreed.

Kara clambered down the side of the lifter. Blood was running from the gash in her thigh. Under the lifter, Nayl rolled Skoh's body over and found the mag-key for the cuffs. He freed himself, picked up Skoh's bolt pistol and limped back to join the others.

Kara jumped off onto the deck and smiled at him. He saw her face was pinched with cold, the lines of her nose and cheekbones florid with sunburn. The vacsuit's faceplate hadn't been up to much either, especially for someone riding a lifter bareback through the Firetide storms.

Nayl embraced her and held her tight for a moment. 'Glad you could make it,' he said into her hair.

'Not the easiest thing I've ever done,' she replied.

They got the cuffs off Preest and Mathuin. Preest gave Kara a hug too. 'I thought we'd left you behind,' she said, her voice brittle with relief. 'I thought we were going to die.'

'Oh, have faith, mistress,' Kara smiled. 'You had Nayl and Mathuin with you, the toughest sons of bitches this side of Macragge. They'd have thought of something.' She looked at the two men, who were busy collecting weapons and ammunition from the bodies. 'Wouldn't you?' she said.

Mathuin shrugged. 'No, I thought we were going to die too.'

'I had a plan,' Nayl said.

'Sure you did,' said Mathuin.

‘I did,’ Nayl grumbled.

‘What? Goad that Gorgi guy into giving you a head-shot?’ Mathuin sneered.

‘It was a start. I was improvising.’

‘Look,’ said Kara. ‘I don’t want to play the doom-sayer... especially as Mathuin has that role covered. But we should book. This lifter was clearly expected. We’ve postponed death, not escaped it.’

Preest looked at her. The shipmistress was badly rattled, Kara could see that. This kind of stuff was definitely not what she’d signed up for. It was like Majeskus all over again. The fragile excitement she’d generated in herself at the start of the Reach expedition was evaporating fast. She was a trader, a void-voyager, not a Throne agent.

‘It’ll be fine,’ Kara said, reloading her autos, and felt stupid saying it. Preest just nodded.

‘Let’s move,’ Nayl said. He’d armed himself with Skoh’s bolter and Gorgi’s autosnub tucked into his belt. Mathuin had taken Verlayn’s laspistol. He handed one of the autosnubs the flight crew had been carrying into Preest’s hands.

‘I don’t care for guns,’ Preest said.

‘Humour me. Just put it in your pocket.’

Pinching the weapon between finger and thumb as if it was a scorpion-ant or a fresh stool, Preest reluctantly dropped it into the deep slash-pocket of her gown.

They left the hangar and slipped down the main access hallway of deck two. A glance told them all auxiliary systems were operating. The cold green light, the feeble air-push.

‘My darling’s running on back-up,’ Preest said.

Nayl nodded. ‘It’s a certain someone has taken control of the *Hinterlight*. Question is, how do we take it back?’

‘Kill ’em all?’ Mathuin asked.

‘Thanks for that, Zeph,’ Kara smiled.

‘Actually, that was top of my list of workable plans,’ Nayl said.

‘We have to—’ Preest began, and then stopped. She was scared, shaking. She cleared her throat before continuing. ‘We have to assess status,’ she said.

She led them away from the main access into a warren of sub-corridors that threaded the space between the primary holds to bow and the enginarium and drive chambers to stern. Progress was easy. All internal doors and hatches were locked open.

‘Just down here,’ she said.

‘What are we looking for?’ asked Nayl.

‘Diagnostic stations,’ Preest said. ‘There are about thirty located at various points on the ship. They’re for maintenance. Senior personnel can check all aspects of ship’s status from any of them.’

They reached a cross-junction in the dim sub-hallways. The diagnostic station was a shielded drum rising out of the deck at the centre of the cross. Preest slid back a cover to reveal the console.

‘It needs the ship’s master keys to operate it,’ she said.

‘How do we—’ Nayl began.

Preest removed her preposterously dangly earrings. The master keys, Nayl realised, were the main parts of each. She slid the keys into the paired sockets and turned both simultaneously. The console display shivered into life. Peering at the display, Preest began to touch some keys.

‘Shit,’ she said.

‘Shit?’ repeated Nayl.

‘I see what they’re doing,’ Preest murmured.

‘Which is?’ Nayl asked.

‘The bastards,’ Preest added.

‘Which bastards?’ Nayl said.

‘Damn it, that’s clever...’

‘What is?’ Nayl asked exasperated.

Preest looked at him at last, and pointed at the screen. ‘Someone’s rewritten the authority codes of my darling ship,’ she said. ‘Clever, clever, clever. Basically, they’ve shut down and locked all my darling’s primary systems – all of them, from drive and life support right down to lighting – and initialised all the secondary and auxiliary systems in preference. The *Hinterlight* is working on back-up, and that network has been entirely secured.’

‘Can you countermand?’ Nayl asked.

‘No, that’s the point. The clever part. This *is* a countermand. It’s personally encrypted. Whoever did this was a genius. They’ve taken over the ship using my own backdoor.’

‘So, what you’re saying... is that we’re totally screwed?’ Mathuin said.

Preest took a deep breath and removed her keys, shutting the console down. ‘No, Mr Mathuin. Nearly screwed, but not totally.’

‘Spit it out, mistress,’ Kara snapped.

Preest smiled at her. ‘My dear, no shipmistress worth her salt, no rogue trader, leaves herself open to this kind of piracy. I have secret, core-level protocols to overwrite this kind of crap. Whoever did this hasn’t found those.’

‘So, that’s good?’ Nayl ventured.

‘Get me to the bridge and I’ll punch in a few codes that will unlock the entire system,’ Preest said.

‘I’m thinking the bridge is probably not an option at this stage,’ Nayl said.

Preest nodded, as if she had expected that answer. ‘All right, get me to enginarium basic on deck six. Right down at the stern. Main cogitator is housed under the bridge itself, but there’s a redundant secondary cogitation stack concealed behind the principal drive chambers. In case of emergencies, damage to the main cogitators or whatever. I can work my magic from there.’

Nayl nodded. ‘Good. Great, in fact. But that’s a long march from here.’

Preest shrugged.

‘Right,’ Nayl said. ‘Zeph... get the mistress down to this back-up stack. Can you do that?’

‘I can try,’ said Mathuin. ‘What will you be doing?’

‘Me and Kara will be heading upstairs to work to the original plan.’

‘Kill ’em all?’ Kara asked.

‘Kill ’em all,’ said Nayl.

RAVENOR HAD BEEN pushed into a small cargo hold forty metres down from the hold containing the rest of the ship’s crew. It was dark. The door was sealed. The light on the latched-on nullifier flashed in the gloom.

The hold’s hatch opened and green aux-light fell in at a slant. A figure filled the doorway.

‘You’re a bastard. A frigging bastard...’ Duboe said as he shuffled into the hold space. ‘You hear me, you frigging bastard? You frigging knuckle-wipe? I hope so. I hope you do. This is all ‘cause of you.’

Duboe faced the chair. He raised the boarding axe he’d pulled from a wall mount. With both hands, he turned the heavy weapon so the back of the axe-head, the pick, was lowered.

‘A good deal, I had,’ Duboe burred. ‘A good trade. Then you and your freaks came in to frig it up.’

‘You know what?’ Duboe asked, as if somehow expecting Ravenor to answer.

‘You know what? This is payback time.’

Duboe hefted the axe up and slammed it against the chair’s hull. Sparks flew. The blow had barely made a scratch on the chair’s surface. Duboe struck again and again. Apart from a few very slight scratches, his attacks had made no dent, though they had pushed the friction-less chair across the chamber.

Cursing, Duboe put his foot against the chair and kicked it over against the far side of the hold. It slid away and came to rest, bouncing off the wall.

Duboe ran at it and delivered another massive blow. He began to hack away with the boarding axe, driving the chair against the wall so it couldn't roll away. Chips of paint began to fleck off the chair's chassis, and dents began to appear as Duboe threw blow after unrelenting blow at it.



THREE

THE *HINTERLIGHT* THUNDERED on into the blistering flares of Firetide, its real-space thrusters powering it away from Bonner's Reach. Already, the Reach was just a tiny, tumbling rock behind it. The solar storm had set the void ablaze. Gigantic forks of plasma and photonic energy lashed and slapped the vacship's hull like striking lightning, causing the vessel to buck and shake.

It powered onwards, despite the onslaught, heading towards the unstable star.

Like a phantom, running with shields raised against the storm, a second spaceship closed in behind it.

MADSEN AND FEAVER Skoh strode onto the *Hinterlight*'s bridge.

'Who's he?' Skoh asked, gesturing to Ahenobarb.

'Muscle,' Madsen said. She walked over to the command throne and looked at Halstrom. His face was now contorted in a grimace of pain as he operated the helm.

'Are we course-set?' Madsen asked him.

Halstrom looked down at his display with difficulty. 'Not quite. Another fifteen minutes. Then we'll be sliding into the star's gravity well.'

Madsen smiled.

'I'm reading a ship,' Halstrom added. 'Sprint trader, on the auspex, less than one AU aft of us.'

Madsen studied the helm display. She activated the main-beam vox and tuned it to a tight band. 'This is *Hinterlight*. Identify yourself.'

'My good woman,' the vox crackled back, 'this is the *Oktober Country*. Put Feaver on.'

Madsen turned to Skoh and he leaned forward. 'Thekla?'

'Good afternoon to you, Feaver. Everything in place, I trust?'

'Of course. We've got them all locked down and the bastard's ship will soon be heading for the heart of the sun.'

'I am pleased. I'd hate to have to start shooting at you.'

'That won't be called for, Master Thekla,' Skoh said. 'Fifteen minutes and we're done.'

'Excellent, Feaver. I look forward to welcoming you aboard. *Oktober Country* out.'

Skoh straightened up and looked at Madsen. 'All set,' he said.

'Thekla sounds like a live one.'

'He is. But we're set.'

'Known him long?'

Skoh shrugged. 'Sixty, seventy years. A working compact. Thekla's been good to my family.'

Madsen nodded. 'Was it his idea? The flects? Or yours?' Skoh wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Neither. I think it was Akunin or Vygold. One of the original contractees. Thekla came in later. By then, all of the captains had seen the earnings from flects. We started to carry them every time we took a contract thirteen run. The returns were huge. Better than the Ministry pays us.'

Madsen shook her head, wondering. 'Screw you,' she said.

The vox-chime bleated.

'Madsen. Report.'

'Is Master Skoh there?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Let me speak to Master Skoh,' the voice said.

Skoh walked over to the console. 'Let me,' he said. 'That's Rainfold, one of my crew.'

Madsen shrugged and stepped back.

'Rainfold? This is Skoh. What's the deal?'

There was a long pause. ‘Chief, we went down to the hangar deck. Your brother had been a long time bringing the prisoners up.’

‘And?’

‘Chief, they’re all dead.’

‘The prisoners?’

‘No, chief. Your brother and his crew. All of them. The prisoners are gone.’

Skoh’s eyes narrowed.

‘Skoh, I’m sorry,’ said Madsen, stepping towards him.

‘The kills are confirmed?’ Skoh said into the vox. Like he was talking about antelopes.

‘All confirmed, chief.’

Skoh coughed quietly. He paused a long time and then said, ‘Alert all hunt teams. Add the prisoners to your list. Hunt them down and kill them all.’

FIRST THE DRONE went by, then the hunter. The only sound they made was the low buzz of the drone’s motor, and that was lost in the background noise of the ship’s real-space drive assemblies. The hunter paused for a second, panned his lasrifles around, then carried on down the corridor and disappeared through the next hatch frame.

Kys and Zael emerged from behind some vent ducting. Visibility was poor down in the sub-decks, and the air was hot and dry. They were approaching the main heat sinks for the gravity generators and the corridor was lined with red insulating tiles that looked the colour of meat in the emergency lighting.

Heading towards the stern, they switched left through a low-ceilinged power-converter chamber. It was even hotter in there, and cakes of dry dust clung to the magnetic vanes of the floor-to-ceiling conveyor cylinders. Everything was vibrating slightly, resonating to the throb of the giant drives nearby.

At the far end of the chamber, they came out into another tiled hallway and started to move along it.

‘Oh!’ Zael said suddenly. Kys glanced behind her and saw the drone rushing towards them at head-height, sensors glowing. Twenty metres behind it down the corridor, the hunter appeared, raising his weapon.

Kys threw Zael down onto the deck and dived flat herself. Two las-rounds whined over them. The drone had also zoomed over them, and was turning back tightly to make another pass. Running forward, the hunter adjusted his aim.

Kys didn’t have time to get a decent shot at him. She seized the returning drone with her telekinesis and applied all the force she could. Already rushing back in the direction of the hunter, the drone accelerated and smashed straight into its master’s astonished face. The impact knocked him over onto his back.

As soon as she was sure he wasn’t going to be getting up again, Kys rose and started hurrying Zael on towards the enginarium.

‘RUN,’ SAID MATHUIN.

‘I don’t care for running!’ Preest protested.

‘You said you didn’t care for guns,’ Mathuin said, dragging her after him.

‘I don’t care for either!’

There had been one, maybe two, of Skoh’s hunting cadre in the outer enginarium bay, and Mathuin knew they’d been seen. He forced Preest to run across the large maintenance shop that separated the outer bay from their destination, the much larger vault of enginarium basic. The shop was a dirty, stained workspace, cluttered with portable machinery and tool-benches. Cogitators lined one wall, racks of machine parts and cartons of spares the other. There was a split level gallery above them with a lifting hoist.

No way were they going to get all the way to the hatch at the far end before trouble caught up with them. Certainly not if that was what Preest thought ‘running’ meant. Mathuin skidded to a halt and pushed her down

behind a stack of bulk-format battery cells and turned back to face the door they'd entered by.

'Stay down!' he hissed.

Almost at once, a figure appeared in the doorway. Mathuin raised his laspistol and fired off a trio of shots that impacted around the hatch frame and discouraged the man from coming through.

In response, a salvo of rounds from a lasrifle came cracking in from outside the hatch. Mathuin ducked. Most of the shots impacted against tool benches before they reached him. Dislodged tools clattered onto the deck. A couple of shots went right over him and made it clear to the far end of the shop where they branded scorch marks on the wall.

Mathuin swung up and fired again. Again, the hunter in the doorway ducked back. A cyber drone came swooping into the room. Mathuin blew it to pieces in the air.

But the slight distraction had given the hunter time to get a better position in the doorway. And he wasn't alone. His lasrifle licked out a fierce, prolonged blurt of fire that forced Mathuin back into cover and allowed a second hunter to roll in through the hatch.

The las onslaught halted. Mathuin began to lift himself up for a return shot when the second hunter opened up on him from the cover he'd found inside the hatch. This man had an autocannon. He hosed the shop with a furious rapid fire of hard slugs. Mathuin ducked again.

The bullets smashed benches over, dented locker doors, shattered the screen of a portable codifier and struck a power-pod trolley with enough force to make it roll sideways.

Hands over her ears, eyes shut, Preest shrieked in terror. Shots were hitting the weighty battery cells they were sheltering behind, rocking them. One cell fell off the top of the stack with a resounding slam.

The huntsman with the lasrifle had taken advantage of the suppressing fire his colleague was providing, and had got into the shop too. Las-fire now joined in support of the cannon. More wholesale destruction. Chips of metal were being blown out of the floor. More glass exploded. Despite

their serious weight, another battery cell was knocked off the stack. Their cover was being taken away.

‘Can’t stay here!’ Mathuin yelled above the gunfire.

She nodded and followed him. They started crawling on their hands and knees back from the battery stack, keeping it between them and the shooters for as long as possible. Preest flinched at every close shot. They reached the power-pod trolley that the bullets had pushed along. Mathuin grabbed it and wheeled it around. It was heavy on its greased castors, but he could manage it. Through brute effort, he rolled it until it was completely between them and their assailants.

The pod began to shake and buck as shots smacked into its far side. Mathuin had to keep a tight grip to stop it being wrenched away. Still on their hands and knees, they began moving back down the shop towards the open hatchway to basic, Mathuin dragging the pod after them as mobile cover.

They reached the hatchway and Preest scurried through. Mathuin followed her. They were inside the gigantic vault of enginarium basic, the vast, flask-shaped forms of the principal drive chambers towering over them.

‘Can you get the hatch shut?’ Mathuin yelled. Shots were zipping through the hatchway over the pod.

Preest shook her head. ‘I told you... everything’s locked out.’

Mathuin put his entire, formidable strength behind the pod and gave it a colossal shove. It trundled back into the shop, knocking into benches.

The hunter with the cannon rose up, firing freely at the pod, assuming Mathuin was still behind it.

From the upright cover of the hatch frame, Mathuin blasted the hunter with his laspistol. He convulsed and fell, his still-firing cannon raking the shop roof.

Mathuin swung back into cover as the lasrifle opened up on him again. He grabbed Preest by the hand.

‘Come on, mistress. More of that running you dislike so much.’

They ran across the open floorspace of the vault towards the giant drive chambers. The train of Preest's gown billowed out behind her. A few sporadic las-shots flew out of the open hatchway. Another twenty seconds, Mathuin estimated, and the remaining hunter would realise they had left the hatch area and come down through the shop after them.

Enginarium basic was cool and echoing. The principal drive chambers were cold and inactive. They were what powered the *Hinterlight* through translation point and into the immaterium. At the moment, the ship was cruising on the power of its real-space engines, which were housed in a separate section of the enginarium two decks above them.

Preest led him in under the massive frames that supported the drive chambers. The architecture of basic was of a cyclopean scale: massive bulkheads, support fairings and cross-members. This part of the ship had to endure particularly extreme pressures and stresses, and was also thickly shielded.

Mathuin glanced back, but the hatch to the machine shop was no longer in sight. If the hunter was in basic with them, then that was just bad luck. He'd probably called in support too.

They went down a short flight of open metal steps onto the chamber's sub-floor, and Preest brought him over to a circular console station growing out of the deck near the drive vault's rear wall. 'This it?' he asked.

She nodded and began sliding the armoured hoods back from the station's panels. Mathuin kept watch. They were dreadfully exposed. Apart from the bulky console itself, there was no cover. Hostiles could approach across the main floor above them. Then there were the gantries and walkways higher up around the drive chambers. 'Hurry up,' he said.

She inserted her master keys, turned them and woke the console up. It came to power, the screens of the codifiers flickering into life. Data scrolled across the screens. Mathuin heard the cooling fans in the consoles base begin to whirl as the powerful cogitation stack, a duplicate of the vessel's main data processing device, began to get warm. Preest's hands

clattered over the keypad. She adjusted several brass dials. 'Here goes,' she said.

She entered a series of complex numerical sequences. Nothing happened for a moment. Then the cold auxiliary lighting across the vault dimmed and the main lighting blinked back into life. Getting used to the sudden glare, Mathuin realised he could hear the main air scrubbers working again too.

'Well?' he said.

Preest peered at the screen. 'Hmmm,' she said. 'Interesting...'

MADSEN SAW THE lighting on the bridge flicker and change. She got up and looked at Skoh.

'That's not good,' she said. 'Kinsky?'

Halstrom's fingers were repeatedly pressing the same keys. 'We're locked out. Bridge stations are dead.'

'God-Emperor, no...' Madsen said.

'See for yourself,' Halstrom said. 'The ship just reverted to primary systems. But the helm's down... engines have just shut down too. We're drifting. I can't get her back.'

Madsen sat at the helm position, twisted the main display round so it was facing her, and began to work the instruments in a determined way.

'What's going on, Mamzel?' Skoh asked.

'Shut up and let me think,' she said.

The hailing chime sounded. Skoh opened the vox. '*Hinterlight*.'

'*Oktober Country*. Skoh, what are you playing at? That hulk of yours just went dead in the vac. Your drives have shut down. You're not even holding a stabilised course.'

'Stand by, *Oktober Country*. Temporary glitch. We'll have it sorted soon. Out.'

Skoh walked over to Madsen. 'Well?'

‘Preest. It’s got to be that damn shipmistress. We know she’s loose.’
‘What’s she done?’

‘She must have a... let me see... my guess would be a back-up data stack somewhere. Something not on the specs, something I couldn’t find. That bitch. She’s brought it online and countermanded my countermand.’

‘Beaten you at your own game?’ Skoh said.

‘No,’ Madsen insisted. ‘She may have shut us out of the master control system temporarily, but she hasn’t got control back herself. I’m not that stupid, Skoh. Operators like Preest customise their ships in all sorts of non-standard ways. Redundant back-ups, hidden cogitation caches, sub-written code systems, encrypted high-functions...’

‘Get to the point,’ Skoh said.

‘I knew she’d have something, that’s the point. I didn’t know what, but it was a fair bet. She’s the type. So I wrote reactive clauses into my countermand. The idea being if she tried to undermine my codes in any way, they’d lock everything up. Yes, we don’t have control. But neither does she. Both primary and default secondary systems have closed down and locked.’

‘Well,’ said Skoh, ‘that’s frigging great. We’ll just sit here then...’

‘No, we won’t,’ said Madsen, rising to her feet. ‘All we have to do is find Preest and her back-up stack, shut it down, and my codes will revert control back to us.’

‘So where is she? This is a big ship. Lots of area to cover. It could take hours for my men to find her.’

‘Yes, I’ve noticed their efficiency already,’ Madsen sneered. She looked at Halstrom. ‘We do this the quick way. Kinsky?’

Halstrom’s body shuddered. He went limp and slumped back in the command throne. A bead of blood began to trickle from his left nostril as his head lolled.

‘Find her,’ said Madsen. ‘Get inside her frigging mind, force her to disable her stack, and then kill the old bitch.’

Sprawled in his seat, Kinsky's body twitched and shivered like a dreaming dog.

FREE. ALERT. ALIVE. Kinsky's mind rushed out from the bridge, surging down hallways, sliding like a wraith between decks. He left a wake of hoar-frost behind him. He was angry now, aching and drawn from the effort of over-mastering Halstrom's mind.

But this... now this is what he did. Searching, tracking, killing. This is what he liked.

As he sped on, he extended his awareness. He could taste the entire bulk of the *Hinterlight*, its hollowed metal form, every sub-duct, every cross-spar, every rivet. It was like a three dimensional schematic to him. And inside it, tiny pinpricks of life heat, the feeble mind-fires of the other humans aboard. Puny little dots. A handful on the bridge, a heavier cluster down in the light cargo holds. Others, spread singly or in small groups through the remainder of the big ship... Skoh's hunters, no doubt.

And two, far down at the stern, in enginarium basic.

Kinsky's mind began to accelerate. Corridors and downshafts flashed past, hallways blurred by.

He was hungry to kill.

'DID YOU FEEL that?' Zael asked, his voice tiny.

Kys nodded. They'd reached the entry bay into the real-space drive section of the enginarium. A short way ahead of them, the deep, split-level drive chambers had just suddenly stopped throbbing with power. The real-space assemblies had inexplicably shut down.

But the abrupt silence hadn't been what Zael was referring to.

'Yes, I felt it,' Kys replied. 'Something's moving.' She shuddered and rested a hand on the wall. 'Really powerful, really raw...'

With total confidence he was correct, Zael said, 'It's Kinsky.'

‘LISTEN!’ NAYL WHISPERED. Kara stopped and cocked her head. She was still getting used to the resumed lighting levels and the elevated noise of the air processors. For a moment, she couldn’t detect anything else.

‘There!’ said Nayl, raising a hand. A sound. A steady, metallic beat, like a hammer on an anvil. It reverberated down the ominously empty corridors.

‘It’s coming from down there,’ Nayl said, and raised his bolt pistol to lead the way. They crossed a junction and entered the bare metal deck space of the light cargo holds. The pair had already dismissed the light cargo area, and agreed to press on towards the bridge. But now the hammering drew them back.

It was getting louder. On either side of the wide hallway, broad hatches stood open, leading into empty sub holds. The hammering was coming from a sub-hold ahead of them on the right. And now they could hear mumbling too. Kara drew both her autos and thumbed off the safeties.

‘LITTLE BASTARD! LITTLE freak!’ Duboe grunted, chopping the axe down. Sweat was pouring off him, staining his filthy clothes. Parts of the axe head had broken off. He swung it again. The front casing of Ravenor’s chair was pitted and dented, like the hull of a ship after a meteor storm. ‘Little frigging bastard!’ Duboe raged and struck yet again.

At last, the axe head punched a hole in the chair’s casing. Duboe had to wrench at it to pull it free. He gazed in sick wonder at the small, raw-edged perforation. He bent down and put his mouth to the hole.

‘Gonna have you out of there soon, bastard. Gonna drag you out and mash you up. You hear me? You hear me?’

WEAPONS RAISED, KARA and Nayl crept closer to the hold door. The metal-on-metal slamming had stopped for a moment, but now it began again.

‘Cover me,’ Kara started to say.

Nayl cried out a warning. Two of Skoh’s hunter pack had suddenly appeared in the doorway of another hold forty metres away down the hallway. They began to open fire. Shots sang past the two of them. Nayl

raised the bolter and fired back, running into the cover of a hold doorway to his left. Kara was too far over to the right hand side of the hallway to make it too.

‘Get in there!’ Nayl yelled. ‘Before they hit you!’

DUBOE HEARD THE sudden exchange of gunfire right outside the hold door. His heart began to race. Axe in hand, he lurched back into the shadows to hide.

KARA FIRED A couple of shots in the direction of the hunters, and then dived into the sub-hold. Rounds exploded against the deck and wall where she had just been standing.

She got up and looked round, guns raised.

‘Oh my Emperor!’ she exclaimed. In the far corner of the hold, Ravenor’s chair was wedged against the wall. It looked like someone had attacked it with a pneumatic hammer.

‘Ravenor?’

She only realised Duboe was there at the very last moment. He came out of the shadows with a bestial roar, hefting his axe. She tried to evade, almost made it, but the haft of Duboe’s axe cracked across her forearms.

Kara went down, diving, wondering if her arms were broken.

They weren’t. Bruised, most certainly. And the impact had smashed both guns out of her hands.

Still on the floor, she rolled violently to her left as Duboe’s axe hacked down at her. It scored the deck plating. Bellowing, he struck again, and she lunged into a forward roll under the scything blade. The roll took her up against the hold wall, and she pushed off from it like a swimmer on the turn, backflipped high in the air onto her feet as Duboe’s murmuring axe kissed empty air. Now she was upright, hunched low, facing him.

‘Duboe. You ninker. Who let you out?’

He sliced the weapon at her again. She danced back. They circled. Another stroke, another sidestep. Round and round. She had to disarm him,

put him down hard. He was gone, she realised. He was virtually frothing at the mouth.

He lunged again, with a speed and ferocity that astonished Kara. She tried to duck, but he caught her a resounding blow with his left elbow and she staggered backwards, her feet slipping out. She virtually fell across Ravenor's chair.

Duboe came at her, howling, axe raised.

She looked round frantically for a weapon, something to throw, anything.

There was a hefty-looking metal unit clamped to the front of Ravenor's chair. She twisted the dial, wrenched it free and hurled it at Duboe's face. Instinctively, he chopped with his axe, connecting with the missile in mid air, and sent it banging away across the hold floor. He raised the axe again.

+Kara? Get out of the way.+

She dropped. Blunt as she was, she felt the awesome surge of psi-power unleashing from the battered chair.

The walls of the hold were suddenly fuming with ice particles.

Duboe left the ground and flew back ten metres into the far wall. The chipped axe clattered from his hands. He remained pinned there by invisible power, like a specimen insect, two metres off the floor. His mouth opened and closed. His eyes bulged. He gasped.

+Duboe. Who's the bastard now?+

Duboe screamed. Ravenor's mind crushed him. Every single bone in Duboe's body shattered as it flattened into the wall.

ZAEL GRABBED KYS by the arm. 'God-Emperor!' he cried out, his voice echoing around the eerily quiet real-space drive chamber.

She'd felt it too. It was so violent, so awful, worse even than the rushing horror of Kinsky's unleashed psychic power. She crouched down and hugged the boy to her protectively.

'It's all right,' he whispered.

'Yeah?'

Zael nodded. 'I think someone's about to have a really bad chair day.'

'HOLY CRAP,' MUMBLED Kara, getting to her feet. The terrible psychic-force had ebbed away. Duboe's ghastly, formless corpse slid down the hold wall like soaked wallpaper.

'Are you all right?' she asked Ravenor.

'No,' he said. His voice was strangely distorted. Duboe's attack had damaged his voxsponder. 'There's no time, Kara. I'm needed elsewhere.'

'But —'

'No buts. We're all dead if I don't act. Guard me here.'

'Absolutely,' she said. There was no response. She knew he was already gone, his mind running free.

She collected her pistols and went to the hold doorway. Outside, the firefight was thicker than before.

'Harlon!'

'I hear you!' he shouted from the hold doorway opposite. He was cracking bolt rounds down the hall. A heavy return of fire was coming their way.

'I've got the boss in here!' she yelled over the gunshots. 'What's our current?'

'Frigging awful!' he bellowed. 'There's at least four of the bastards down there now, with good cover. We're not going that way.'

Kara swung out of her doorway and let rip with bursts from both pistols.

'I've got to guard Ravenor here!' she cried as she dropped back. 'I think you should double back and see if you can reach the bridge!'

'And leave you here?' he questioned.

'That was the plan, remember? Let's stick to it.'

'But—'

'Just move your arse! I can deal!'

He looked across at her. 'You sure?'

'Frig, yeah. It's me, remember.'

He smiled. She'd always liked that smile. 'Get to the bridge. Kill 'em all,' she said.

Nayl nodded, changing clips. 'See you later, Kara Swole.'

'You know it.'

'Cover me,' he said, rising. Kara leant out of the doorway and rained caseless rounds down the hallway with both guns. Behind her, Nayl started to run back down the way they'd come in. The storm of pistol fire made the hunters down the hall duck for cover. Then they started to fire back again with renewed vigour.

'Here we go,' Kara said to herself.

'SHOULDN'T WE DO something?' Medicae Zarjaran asked. Thonius wanted to shrug, but he knew it would hurt his arm. Outside the doorway of the hold where the crew were imprisoned, their guards were engaged in a blistering exchange of fire with someone. Two or three more of their kind had come to join them. Smoke from the intense weapons' fire was fogging the deck.

Was this salvation, Thonius wondered? Was this death? Should he get up and try to do something? That was what Zarjaran had meant. Not 'we'... 'him'. *Carl*.

He could try and attack the guards from behind while they were occupied with the firefight. Sure he could. Give him a damned Leman Russ tank and a squad of Astartes, and he'd be right on the job.

'We should just keep our heads down,' he said.

'Really?' Zarjaran asked. He had a look on his face. 'But I thought—'

'Thought what?' Thonius asked.

'Nothing,' said the doctor.

Thought I was a hero? A hard-bitten Throne agent? Think again.

MATHUIN WAS GETTING really edgy. 'For Terra's sake, mistress... sort it out!'

‘I can’t!’ she said. ‘Whoever did this has been very canny. We’re blocked. They can’t get into the ship’s master controls any more than I can.’

She looked up from the cogitation stack suddenly. ‘What was that?’

Mathuin looked up too. He hadn’t seen any movement. Was that hunter catching up with them at last...?

‘Like a wind,’ Preest said. ‘Like a monsoon wind. A rushing noise. I...’

Her voice trailed off. She looked down in horror at the surface of the stack console. Frost coated it. Coated her fingers, her gaudy rings, her velvet sleeves.

‘Oh dear God-Emperor preserve me...’ she stuttered.

+He’s not listening.+ Kinsky’s voice boomed in her head. She looked up into the lofty spaces of the vast enginarium. There was nothing there.

Kinsky, moving like a missile down from the roof, looking into her terrified, blinking eyes. He made his rushing mind-form thorny, the better to gouge through her flimsy mind walls.

Something hard and furious struck Kinsky’s mind from side on, and sent it sparking away across the enginarium vault. In pain, bleeding psi-force, Kinsky recovered, forming into a thought-armoured ball, tendons of razor-string lashing out around it.

+Kinsky.+

His assailant appeared. It took the form of a marine predator, a great saw-toothed fish, shimmering with inner light. It swam down around the material stanchions of the nearest drive chamber, topaz energy shining from its deathless eyes.

+Ravenor.+

With a beat of its tail, the twenty-metre fish swam through the air towards the twitching armoured ball. Kinsky shimmered, re-composing his non-corporeal guise into a giant mantis, shining in a pearlescent light the colour of his psychotic eyes, its massive claws snapping.

+You wanted to go, Kinsky, Let’s go.+

Ravenor's tail slammed round and he surged at the psi-form, eyes rolling back as his great jaws gaped to bite.

'WHAT THE HELL is that?' Preest stammered. Mathuin looked at what she was pointing at. The air was shimmering, unfocused, above the main space of the enginarium bay. As they watched, a dent appeared in the decking, then another, another two, in the plated wall. Something invisible tore through one of the metal walkways along the flank of the second drive chamber and it disintegrated, shearing apart, cascading sparks as it tumbled the nine metres to the main deck. Gigantic toothmarks hammered into view on one of the side ductings. It tore loose, venting columns of steam, and flew into the air. High up, it seemed to strike something and bounced back onto the floor with a dreadful clang. Stripes of ice tracked across the deck and vanished as quickly as they had been made. Corposant flames erupted along the railings of an upper walkway.

'I... I don't know,' Mathuin said. Something was messing with his inner ear and his kinaesthetic sense, and from the look on Preest's face, she felt it too. Suddenly, he could smell flowers.

'Lavender!' she cried.

Then salt. Then charcoal. Then stagnant water. Then blood.

'Throne!' Preest said, covering her nose and coughing. A huge raking split appeared across the length of the deck plating, showering metal shards in all directions.

'Preest... mistress...' Mathuin said. 'You have to concentrate. Shut all this out. Get the system working again.'

She looked at him. 'But—'

'Do it!'

She bent down and began working the keyboard. A grazing dent the size of a demipach cratered the far wall of the vault.

'Ignore all this! Do it!' Mathuin cried.

Then a las-round missed Mathuin's head by a few centimetres. More followed.

The hunters had found them.



FOUR

‘SKOH! REPORT YOUR damn status now! My Navigator reads your ship as lousy with psi-force!’

Skoh pressed the ‘live’ stud on the vox console. ‘Stand by, Thekla. We have a few problems, but we’re dealing.’

‘I want that ship burning, Skoh!’ Thekla’s voxed voice crackled. ‘Burning and gone, with all its crew! That was the whole point of this protracted exercise!’

‘Tell him to shut up,’ Madsen said.

Skoh breathed deeply. ‘We’re getting there, Thekla. A few unforeseen setbacks. Please, stand by.’

He cut the channel.

‘Well? This is your plan, Mamzel Madsen. Impress me.’

Madsen was with Ahenobarb, bent over Kinsky’s body. The psyker was jerking and thrashing in his stupor.

‘Gods!’ Ahenobarb said. Ugly red weals like a bite mark had just appeared on Kinsky’s throat. Bright arterial blood began to leak out of the psyker’s lips. His jaw clenched.

‘Rav... en... or...’ he gurgled.

‘Damnation,’ said Madsen.

‘Mamzel,’ Skoh said, ‘it appears this oh-so-perfectly wrought trap of yours is coming apart at the seams.’

‘I—’ Madsen began.

‘Shhh!’ Skoh interrupted. He raised a hand and listened to the voices of his men coming over his microbead earplug. Then he turned and looked at her. ‘I think you should sort things.’

‘What? Kinsky is—’

Skoh slid his long-las out of the leather boot on his back and armed it. He didn’t aim it at her, but the threat was very clear. ‘I’m taking charge, Madsen. You’ve ballsed it up this far. My men report they have the shipmistress and one other cornered at the far stern. Get down there. That’s clearly the location of her back-up. Get down there and make things good so we can resume control, dump this hulk into the star and be gone.’

Madsen drew her autosnub and glanced at Ahenobarb. ‘Eight,’ she said. ‘You’re with me, Ahenobarb.’

‘I think that’s best,’ Skoh replied.

Madsen and the giant hurried away out of the bridge hatch.

LAS-BOLTS AND SOLID slugs were impacting all around them. Preest and Mathuin had to stay low behind the console, parts of which were shattering off under the gunfire. There were at least five of them out there, Mathuin reckoned. Three on the deck, two on the gantries. They had them pinned. He couldn’t raise his head enough to squeeze off a shot, let alone allow Preest to complete her work. They were just waiting to die.

KARA SWITCHED NEATLY out of the doorway and rattled fire from both guns. This time she aced. One of the hunters, approaching over-confident, went over.

But she was down to her last two clips. She looked across at Ravenor’s chair. Battered, holed, it was silent, as if it was empty.

I BECAME A CYCLONE, sweeping away the shoals of his mind-darts like leaves. Kinsky dropped low beneath my storm-force bow-wave and lunged upwards with a mental lance. I changed into a glittering avalanche that fell on him and snapped the lance, but Kinsky slid away like oil and drove the broken-off spearhead into my side. Psi-energy drizzled out, spattering like blood. I shook off the pain, turned and exhaled a gout of pyrokinetic flames that ignited Kinsky like an oily slick.

Flames roared up, pink-hot, sour, fierce. I heard him scream. For a second, I believed I had beaten him.

But then he rose up out of the flames. He wore his human form for a second, laughing at me, arms wide, his hateful eyes becoming little secondary mouths that laughed along. The fire slid off him harmlessly.

So be it. The fight was not over. We threw mind-traps at each other, traps of increasing complexity and ingenuity; bright, intricate things that snapped open, bit shut, became spiked, became corrosive. He and I brushed them aside, and the blizzards of thought daggers we launched once the traps had failed. Then we closed again, our non-corporeal forms shifting and changing rapidly as we tried to out-think one another and prepare for the other's next ploy. Undecided, our ectoplasmic shapes bent and twisted and malformed, rupturing like the skin on boiling milk, puffing out like cysts, spurting like soft lava.

Kinsky suddenly became a bruised, squid-like form that lashed at me with twenty metre-long tentacles. I had already raised overlapping shields of mind-plating, but they buckled under the blows, so I slid the plates apart and then closed them like a vice on the tentacles when they whipped in again. Several snapped. Dark clouds of inky pain and anger squirted from the severed ends. While he was still reeling, I rolled my non-corporeal form into a porcupine ball and launched a shower of quill-shots at Kinsky, pinning the Ministry agent's mind against the sliding fabric of space-time.

Howling, Kinsky tore free. Reality was so badly damaged where I had pinned him, the noxious, infernal light of the warp shone through the punctures.

Kinsky pulsed, reforming. For a moment, he was humanoid shape again, then that split apart as something vast grew up out of it. A thing of smoke and darkness, beaked, eyeless, a primordial ravager from ancient myth.

Nothing seemed to stop him. He was a monstrously powerful psyker. I had the edge in terms of training and practice, and this gave me real

finesse. But I was nothing like as powerful as Kinsky's crude, unstructured mind. I would not lose to him. I refused to be bested by such a feral mind.

But steadily, he drove me back across the enginarium.

THE *HINTERLIGHT* SHUDDERED violently. On the bridge, Skoh saw hazard alerts begin to light up all the station displays.

He looked at the nearest one as another thump shook the deck. What was that? Were they being fired on?

The scope said yes. Two hits, amidships. Starboard hangar voided, hull damage. Fire in the real-space drive chambers. Locked open doors had slammed automatically as the emergency safety systems had cut in.

Astounded, Skoh activated the main-beam vox. 'Thekla? What the hell are you doing?'

'Firing on you, of course,' the vox gurgled. 'I'm tired of waiting, and I'm worried that inquisitor bastard has got loose.'

'Thekla!' Skoh snarled. 'Cease fire!'

The *Hinterlight* bucked again. 'Can't do that, Feaver. Sorry. I have to make sure that ship and its crew are dead, and if you won't be a sport and dive it into the star for me, what can I do? Nothing personal.'

Another brutal shudder. Klaxons sounded. Skoh could smell smoke now.

'You bastard, Thekla,' he said.

'Whatever. I recommend you get off that death trap, Feaver, my old friend. I'll be waiting to pick you up. But hurry... I intend to make short work of that ship.'

The vox went dead. As if to prove the shipmaster's point, the *Hinterlight* shook again. Skoh picked up his long-las and headed for the exit. There was an escape module compartment close by, at the end of the midships companionway. He was halfway down it, when Harlon Nayl came through the end hatch.

They saw each other at once. Both started to fire and move simultaneously. Firing his long-las from the hip, Skoh hurled himself to his right towards the cover of a bulkhead. Nayl's bolt pistol came up

blasting. He threw himself into an almost full-length dive towards a side hatchway.

The two powerful weapons blazed at each other up and down the companionway, raising a veil of smoke and riddling the wall-plating with dents and holes. Neither man had much in the way of cover. Nayl's bolts chipped and whined against the thick bulkhead concealing Skoh. The hunter's las-shots fireballed and deflected off the hatch-housing where Nayl was tucked in.

Stalemate... at least until one of them ran out of ammunition. Skoh didn't believe they had that long anyway. Thekla's batteries would have the *Hinterlight* dead in just another few minutes.

He had a better idea. Ignoring the bolt rounds slamming against the bulkhead, he popped the powerclip out of his rifle, and replaced it with another from his belt. Special load, hot-shot, useful for when big game got really big.

Under these circumstances, at this range, the round would go right through the hatch-housing. And the idiot standing behind it.

AGAINST THE DAZZLING backdrop of the Firetide storm, the *Oktober Country* closed in, its weapon turrets flashing every few seconds. Neither ship was a military class vessel, and neither possessed the sort of Fleet-grade weaponry that could annihilate a rival instantly. But like most rogue traders, the *Oktober Country* had enough firepower to take care of itself. Its sustained bombardment would eventually blow Preest's ship apart.

Drifting, helpless, shieldless, the *Hinterlight* soaked the damage up. Sections of plating blew out like foil. Scabbed patches of hull crackled with shorting power sources or glowed red-hot.

Inside, significant chunks of the ship were obliterated, holed to space. Others were auto-sealed, ablaze.

Madsen was still heading for the stern.

'We should just... just take that bulk lifter and go,' Ahenobarb ventured.

‘Go where?’ Madsen replied. ‘That’s hardly an option. God-Emperor, I can’t believe Thekla could be this insane!’

‘What do we do, then?’ urged Ahenobarb.

‘Carry on. We deal with Preest, shut down her tinkering, then we’ve got control back. I can raise the shields. Stop that madman from blowing us apart.’

Ahenobarb looked doubtful, but he was used to following her orders.

The deck shuddered under another impact. ‘Come on!’ Madsen said.

She had been intending to short-cut down through the real-space drive chambers, cutting a good five minutes off the journey, but the doors to the drive room were sealed.

‘That chamber is blown out!’ Ahenobarb moaned, and started to look for an alternate route.

Madsen looked at the doorpanel display. ‘No, there’s still pressure. But there is fire. It’s worth it.’

She took a multikey out of her hip-pocket, pressed it to the hatch control and overrode the lock. The hatch swung open. Heat and scorching smoke swept out. Fires were blazing through the long, double-storey drive rooms, and alarms were singing all over the place. Coughing, Madsen led the way out along the main gantry walk, ignoring the heat from below.

KYS AND ZAEL had felt the first brutal impact of Thekla’s attack, and quickly found themselves driven back through the drive chambers by the inferno kicked off by a damaged power-capacitor. Attempting to exit, they’d discovered the section hatches had locked automatically.

They retraced their steps, desperate to find a hatch that would open to them. It was getting hard to see, to breathe. They clambered their way up the hot metal of one of the gantry ladders to escape a new wall of flames that had sprung up, but now fires were licking into the upper levels of the chamber too.

‘Back! Back!’ Kys screamed at Zael. ‘We have to go back and—’

‘Behind you!’ Zael yelled suddenly.

Ahenobarb appeared from nowhere, out of the smoke. He swung at her. Kys tried to draw her pistol, but his fist hit too hard, too soon. She went down on the gantry mesh, her gun falling away down into the flames.

Ahenobarb bent down to pick her up. She only had her boline left. She drew it and stabbed it into Ahenobarb's calf.

He bleated with pain. Tearing out of his hands, Kys punched the blade in under his nose.

Ahenobarb fell backwards, over the rail, into the boiling fire beneath them.

A bullet hit Kys in the left shoulder and spun her back down onto the gantry decking again. Starkly lit by the flamelight, Madsen advanced towards her, gun raised. A section of the gantry behind Madsen folded and toppled away into the inferno.

'I told you what I'd do if I saw you again,' Kys said, struggling up to meet her.

'What? Kill me?' Madsen answered. She sneered and raised her auto.

Kys turned. She had no weapon. There was a bloody hole in her left shoulder.

Madsen began to fire.

Kys flipped the fish scales off her collar stud telekinetically... one, two, three...

Spinning, whirring, they sliced into Madsen's windpipe.

Limbs flailing, weapon firing, Madsen fell backwards off the broken gantry and plunged away into the firestorm.

'Come on,' Kys yelled, staggering back to Zael. 'Come on!' They ran as the drive room began to collapse around them.

THE BRIDGE WAS empty. Kinsky's body lay in the second helm station. Halstrom lay in the command throne. The display screens and hololiths showed how the *Oktober Country's* guns were punishing the *Hinterlight*.

Kinsky twitched in his coma. A smile twitched on his lips. It had been a hard fight, certainly the hardest psi-duel he'd ever fought in his life. He

had to give Ravenor that much. But it was at an end now. Far away in enginarium basic, Ravenor was down, dazed, pinned, and Kinsky's non-corporeal jaws were closing around the inquisitor's throat. As a final, artistic flourish, Kinsky's mind-form sprouted venomous teeth to deliver the coup.

With a ghastly intake of air, Wystan Frauka sat up. A bubble of blood bulged at his nostril and popped.

Slowly, very slowly, he pulled himself upright and bent over Kinsky.

'Hey,' he said. He slapped Kinsky's cheek. 'Hey!'

Swaying back, Frauka produced his lho-stick carton and his lighter. He stuck a stick in his mouth and lit it. When he exhaled, smoke puffed out of the hole in his chest too.

'Frig! These things'll kill you,' he said, to no one in particular. Then he leaned over.

'Hey,' he said again, kicking at Kinsky's leg. Kinsky remained still.

Frauka reached up and deactivated his limiter.

Suddenly, shockingly, sucked back into his own skull, Kinsky thrashed and woke up. Feebly, he reached out, and looked up at Frauka's face.

Frauka took the stick out of his mouth, exhaled, put it back between his lips, and lent down. He took Kinsky's skull in his hands and wrenched it around. Kinsky's neck snapped with a pop.

'And there you go,' Frauka said. He switched his limiter back on, took the lho-stick out of his mouth, and fell over.



FIVE

SUDDENLY KINSKY WAS gone. His psi-form melted, the ectoplasmic structure of it thawing away like snow. He was dead. I was in no doubt about that, though I had no idea how.

My mind was lacerated, damaged from the fight, but I knew I could not submit to unconsciousness yet. I could sense the terrible damage being inflicted on the defenceless ship.

I looked down at enginarium basic around me. Mathuin and Preest were still pinned down behind the stack console by Skoh's hunters. I stabbed out, and each hunter was felled by a psychic-dagger. Dead or unconscious – I didn't much care which – they dropped where they were.

+Cynia!+

'G-Gideon?'

+Get up! You're clear! There's no time! Get up and override Madsen's codes... Quickly, woman!+

She and Mathuin rose. She started working at the console. Struck again, the ship rolled badly.

'What the bloody hell is happening to my darling?' Preest wailed.

+Just override the codes! We need to get the shields raised!+

She did as she was told. But even if she was successful, there needed to be someone on the bridge to get the shields up.

I soared out of enginarium basic and hurtled up through the decks, through bulkheads, through cabins open to hard vacuum, through chambers gutted by fire.

I swept through the light cargo holds, burning out the minds of the hunters about to overwhelm dear Kara as I passed.

+Get my chair to the bridge!+ I left the command ringing in her head as I flew on.

Up through spinal, through the lateral halls, along the midships companion way. There was Nayl. Without even pausing, I slammed Feaver Skoh into the wall as I went by. He fell heavily, unconscious.

I entered the bridge. It was in uproar – klaxons, alarms, red hazard lights and runes on almost every display. There was Kinsky, dead in one seat, Wystan Frauka sprawled across him, dead or dying. In the command throne, Halstrom. He looked dead too.

His breathing was shallow. His mind had been badly abused.

+Halstrom! Halstrom!+

He twitched, but he did not wake.

I had no other option. I had to wake him.

He cried out as I went in, waking with the shock. Using his expertise, I studied the main console. Still locked out. The auspex showed the *Oktober Country* all but alongside, firing still.

With Halstrom's fingers, I opened the intercom.

'Preest! Are you done yet?' My words sounded strange in Halstrom's voice.

'Nearly, she says,' Mathuin answered. A pause. 'Try it now.'

Nothing.

'Correction,' Mathuin added. 'Try it now.'

Primary control had just been restored. I hit a series of controls and raised the shields.

Not all ignited. Thekla's attack had already vaporised some shield nodes and power feeds, and those that did come on were weak. Still, the vibration from the bombardment abated slightly.

I tried to probe Halstrom's beaten mind, to work out what he would do.

The shields, like most of the ship's systems, derived their power from the ship's primary reactor, which drove the real-space drives. But the fire in the real-space chambers had cut that back by about seventy-five per cent,

taking the *Hinterlight*'s motive power away with it. Instead, I woke up the secondary reactor, whose only function was to power the currently deactivated warp drive. I transferred that power into the primaries and immediately boosted their shields by forty per cent. It was unorthodox practice, risky too, but an old and very workable Fleet captain's trick, courtesy of Halstrom's experience.

I became aware of Nayl as he came up beside me.

'Halstrom?' he asked.

'No, it's me,' I said.

'Ah. Thought so. Guessing that was you who suckered Skoh outside too?'

'Yes.'

Nayl nodded. 'Thanks for that.'

I was working too hard for decent conversation. Despite the boosted shields, large parts of the starboard flank, the focus of Thekla's onslaught, were still vulnerable, lacking as they did any remaining shields to reinforce. The *Oktober Country* would still kill us in short order, unless...

Another little trick from Halstrom's mind. With what little motive power I could squeeze from the damaged real-space drive, I got the ship moving and turning. We slid through coruscating flame walls of the solar storm, turning hard to port. Thekla's ship spurred after us, still firing its fusion batteries.

'Can you... fly this thing?' Nayl asked.

'No. But Halstrom can,' Turning her hard, I was presenting the *Hinterlight*'s undamaged port side – and active shields – to Thekla's ruinous guns. Of course, with very much less motive thrust than the *Oktober Country*, it was going to be near-impossible keeping it there. Already, Thekla was steering out under us to come around at our wounded quarters again.

'Harlon... see what weapons we have left,' I said.

He crossed to the fire control station and started to fumble with the unfamiliar function controls. I kept the turn tight, rolling the ship to keep the full shields pointing at Thekla's dogged attack.

‘Frig all,’ Nayl said at last. ‘Most of it’s shot out. Forget lasers, fusion beamers. I’ve got one missile battery under the prow that’s still live.’

‘Arm it and target it on the *Oktober Country*’s bridge,’ I said. It was getting hard to maintain control over Halstrom. He was fading fast. I could feel perspiration dripping off his brow as he struggled to stay conscious.

‘They’ll be shielded,’ Nayl scoffed. ‘Especially around the bridge section.’

‘I know, Harlon.’

‘They’ve been whaling on us for a good ten minutes. We’re junked. They’re still at optimum. We’re not going to achieve anything firing at their bridge except wasting our last missiles.’

‘I know. Please do as I ask.’

‘Very well...’ he shrugged.

Halstrom was slipping away. I made one last effort to turn the ship and then stepped out of his mind. Released, he fell back in the chair. Non-corporeal, I looked at the displays. We’d turned hard, but in another sixty seconds, the *Oktober Country* would pull clear and resume firing on our damaged sections.

‘Armed and targeted,’ Nayl reported.

+Harlon, when you hear me give the word, fire. No questions.+

He nodded.

I left the bridge.

Through plating, through insulation layers, through inner and outer hull sections, through raised shields, into open space.

Firetide swelled around me, as far as my mind could see. An ocean expanse of flame and seething discharge, crackling and shimmering. Behind me, the wounded bulk of the *Hinterlight*, sagging and wallowing in the storm. Ahead, the great, dark shape of the predatory *Oktober Country*, roaming in for the kill, weapon banks flaring and spitting.

It was a gigantic sprint trader, ornate and exquisite, one of the most ancient human ships I had ever seen. I could smell its great age, the dusty

odours of its long, rigorous life, the musky, spiced auras of the far flung places it had visited, the xenos perfumes of its more ungodly voyages.

I could taste the steely resolve of its ruthless master.

I swept on, through the cavorting radiance of the storm and went in, through its shields, its hull...

Thekla stood on a raised platform, studying his actuality sphere. Target runes were clustering around the graphic of the *Hinterlight*. He was a tall man, regal, in a selpic blue coat furnished with gold braid and a silk cravat. His face was an organic tracery of inlaid circuitry. MIU linkage cables tracked out from the base of his skull, from under the powdered wig he wore, and connected his mind to the sprint trader's systems. His hands were augmetic. He was shouting orders to his bridge crew.

There were thirteen of them, arranged around the edge of his platform, operating polished brass stations. Helm, sub-helm, system-control, vox-and-com, navigation supervisor, ordnance officer, defence officer...

Defence officer. I plunged into the man's mind.

+Now, Harlon. Now.+

'The *Hinterlight* has launched missiles, master!' the ordnance officer called out beside me.

I heard Thekla laugh. 'One last effort, eh? Rather too little, too late, I think.'

The defence officer was fighting me. He struggled and contorted.

'Lefabre? What the frig's the matter with you, man? You're twitching around like an idiot!'

I was hurt, weak. The man's mind was strong. At this range, and through the turmoil of the storm, my abilities were desperately limited, especially without the boosting relay of a wraithstone marker.

But I would not let him go. Frantically, I blew out his neural system, and forced his twitching hands onto the brass levers of his station.

And cut the *Oktober Country*'s shields.

In the last millisecond of his life, Thekla realised what was happening and screamed out a name.

My name, in fact.

Eight missiles, in tight formation, screamed in silently out of the storm and vaporised the *Oktober Country's* bridge, taking everyone with it.



SIX

‘READY FOR THIS?’ Kys asked.

‘Yes, I am. Quite ready,’ Ravenor replied. His voice still sounded odd, anguished almost. There had been no time to repair his chair’s damaged voxsponder.

The hatch opened. Ravenor slid forward into the bare cell, flanked by Kys and Carl Thonius.

Feaver Skoh shivered and looked up at the trio. He had been stripped naked, and chained to the wall.

‘You,’ he murmured. They could smell his fear. He had been expecting this.

‘We are going to have a conversation,’ Ravenor said. ‘How pleasant it becomes is up to you.’

Skoh shrugged. ‘I’ve got nothing left,’ he said. ‘Ask what you want, inquisitor.’

‘Where do the flects come from?’

‘The Mergent Worlds,’ he said simply.

‘The Mergent Worlds are out of bounds. Forbidden, interdicted by the Fleet,’ Kys said. ‘How can that be?’

Skoh looked at her. ‘Rogue traders go many places that are forbidden,’ he said. The very best can get wherever they want. If the return is good enough.’

‘The best?’ Thonius asked. ‘Like your friend Thekla, you mean?’

‘Thekla, and the others.’

‘A consortium?’ Ravenor said. Skoh shrugged again.

‘Thekla... and Akunin?’

He nodded. 'Akunin, Vygold, Marebos, Foucault, Strykson, Braeden. Those are the ones I know.'

'What is contract thirteen?' Thonius asked.

Skoh blinked, amazed.

'I heard you and Mamzel Madsen talking,' Thonius explained.

'And it was in Duboe's mind,' Ravenor added.

'That frigging idiot. All right. It's... it's the reason the fleet thing began in the first place. Contract thirteen is an off-books arrangement between the rogue consortium and the Ministry of Sub-sector Trade. The terms of the contract are simple. The traders go to the Mergent Worlds and recover tech salvage.'

'What do you mean by "tech salvage"?' Kys said.

'Whatever they can find. Spica Maximal is the target of choice. Hive cities, population centres, whatever, all just resurfaced from the warp storm. They're loaded with stuff. Hive towers of the Administratum, full of codifiers, cogitation banks, out-use terminals. That's what the Ministry wants. The consortium hauls it back, holds filled to bursting, and delivers it to Petropolis. In return, the Ministry pays. Pays pretty well. And also supplies the consortium with times, dates and codes to help them get around the fleet interdiction blockade.'

'Why does the Ministry want the tech?' Thonius asked.

Skoh shook his head. 'I don't know,' He winced as Ravenor squeezed his mind with a psi-tweak. 'Really, I don't! I'm just a game agent. I ride with Thekla.'

'Make that... rode with Thekla,' Kys smiled.

'Whatever. I relied on him for a lift out to the rip-worlds. More often than not he was going that way because he was on a contract run. I got to see what he did. I was there. But I don't know why. Tech... tech stuff is valuable, right? Isn't that why?'

'Perhaps,' Ravenor said.

'What about the flects?' Kys said.

‘They were there. Everywhere. I mean, on a place like Spica Maximal, they were all over the ground, far as the eye could see. When we found out what they did, we brought them back with us. The Ministry paid good for the contract cargoes, but it got that a trader in the consortium could double, triple his earnings running flects on the side. That’s... that’s where I got into it. The side action,’ Skoh looked down, as if he was ashamed. That seemed unlikely. Just caught.

‘The Ministry didn’t object to the flect trade?’ Thonius asked.

‘At first. But they tolerated it. Everyone was happy.’

‘Until my team opened it up, through Duboe and yourself,’ Ravenor said.

Skoh nodded. ‘Yeah. That’s why we got into this. You had to be silenced.’

‘Because my interest in the flect trade had put me close to something much bigger?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the parties involved couldn’t very well move against an inquisitor on a world like Eustis Majoris. Not without blowing everything. So they decide to lure me out to Lucky Space, dropping hints and clues to keep me interested. And out here... I could be disposed of, and no one would know better.’

‘That was the plan,’ said Skoh.

‘Madsen’s plan?’ Kys asked.

‘Madsen’s plan,’ Skoh agreed. ‘But Kinsky made it work by thinking ahead of you. Duboe, Siskind... whatever it took. Planting clues, shielding other memories. Drawing you on.’

A sudden chill wrapped the cell. Frost crackled up the metal walls.

‘One last thing...’ said Ravenor.

‘Oh!’ gasped Skoh. ‘Shit, please...’

I SLAMMED INTO his unhappy mind, turned away his surface thoughts and buried my mind in his memories. From the first scent of the synapses, I knew everything he had told us had been the truth. But I went back. Further.

Spica Maximal. Mergent World. Lately resurfaced, dead, from the horrors of the warp storm, like lost ships dredged up, dripping and rotten, from an ocean depth. I was Feaver Skoh, crunching down a blasted slope with others of Thekla's landing party.

Before me, a vast wasteland of jet cinders and blackened material, twisted, bulbous, shattered, crusted. The sky was domed and full of rushing, splintered cloud. A sun, red as a blood-shot eye, was rising in the firmament. There were buildings ahead of me, towers and spires and cyclopean citadels, all ruined, all made of solidified night. A burned city. A murdered hive. I walked down the vast towers, and saw their countless windows, row upon row, tier upon tier, deadlights like eye sockets, giving back no reflection, stained by unimaginable ages spent in consuming darkness. The crazed black soil under my feet was covered in a myriad shards of broken glass. Imperfectly, like a deranged mosaic, they reflected back Skoh's image.

For a moment I shivered. I was back in Bergossian's dream, the dream that had nearly dragged me to my doom in the deadlofts of Petropolis.

But this was no dream. It was Skoh's memory of Spica Maximal. Bergossian, poor lunatic Bergossian, had seen it in his visions.

The visions of the flects.

They were under my feet. The endless, shattered pieces of glass blown out from the numberless windows of the great hive. Each one charged with power from the long ages they had lingered, submerged in the warp. Each shard was loaded with a reflection of something.

And some things were too terrible to look upon.

This was what Skoh and the other freebooters had collected and dealt. Broken glass from the ruins of a warp-engulfed hive.

I withdrew from his memory. Skoh slumped back, gasping.

'That is all,' I told him.

'I... I have one question. About my brother. Who killed him?'

'He was shot by my warrior Zeph Mathuin during combat,' I said. 'But Mathuin serves me, so the actual answer to your question is... I did.'

‘WHAT HAPPENS NOW?’ asked Harlon Nayl. No one answered immediately. Nayl stood on the *Hinterlight*’s bridge. Aided by her servitors and her freed crew, the ship-mistress was trying to repair some life into the wounded ship. She was crying. The damage was immense.

Halstrom, along with Frauka, was down in the infirmary. Last Nayl had heard, Zarjaran was fighting to save both of them.

‘Now?’ Ravenor replied. ‘Harlon, this isn’t about the fleets any more.’

‘Got that much,’ Nayl smiled.

‘We have been presented with a strong possibility that the local Imperium authorities are trading in heretical technology. The lord sub-sector’s private ministry, at least. I don’t know if the corruption goes right up to the lord sub-sector himself, but the chances are high. We have a much, much bigger deal on our plate.’

‘We’re going back to Eustis Majoris, then?’ Kys asked.

‘Yes,’ said Ravenor. ‘But now we have an advantage. Our adversary thinks we’re dead. Without Thekla to contradict this fact, we can return in disguise. Disguise is essential. I have no way of knowing how deep this corruption runs. Maybe into the Officio Angelus itself.’

‘The *Hinterlight* isn’t going to get us there,’ Mathuin said. That was true enough. So badly wounded, the *Hinterlight* would need months to limp back to a safe harbour outside Lucky Space and begin repairs. Besides, there was a real chance that Preest, shaken and tearful, would refuse another mission for the ordos.

‘I... I have an idea...’ Nayl began.

Zael stood alone on the observation deck, gazing out at the storms of Firetide. They were fading now, the solar storm dying away. Still, the flashes outside jumped his long shadow back and forth across the deck.

‘We’re going back,’ Kys said as she joined him.

‘Back?’

‘To Petropolis. That all right?’

Zael nodded.

‘You’re all right with that?’ she said.

‘It’ll be good to see home again,’ Zael walked away from her and exited the deck.

‘He’s more than nascent,’ Kys said to Ravenor. The chair coasted up beside her.

‘Much more.’

‘Passive like you thought?’

‘Yes. Mirror psyker. From what you told me, I think he’s very rare. I think the flects he’s used have touched off something in his mind. Empowered deep potentials. He’s not active at all, but I think he might become a powerful reflective. I think I might be able to teach him to far-see. To predict. To foretell.’

‘Yeah, I felt that too. It’s like he knows what’s about to happen.’

‘Not knows, so much as... echoes. The damned flects have woken something in him, but it’s something quite amazing.’

‘I hope he thinks so,’ said Patience Kys.

CARL THONIUS SIGHED. His arm really hurt, but this would make it better.

They’d gone over and searched the *Oktober Country* before imprisoning its surviving crew and allowing it to tumble away into the star’s gravity well, undirected and helm-less, tracing the doom it had reserved for the *Hinterlight*.

Thekla’s holds had been packed with flects. Raw ones, not even yet packed into their red-tissue wraps.

Carl had one cupped in his hands. It felt warm. He opened his fingers and looked down.

AT THE END of Firetide, a bulk lifter had flown into Bonner’s Reach. Transponder codes identified it as belonging to the *Oktober Country*. Hooded, cloaked, three figures left the lifter and hurried to an arranged meeting in a private booth on one of the first salon’s upper galleries.

A diminutive figure entered the booth, as pict and psi screens folded down around him.

‘I am Sholto Unwerth, and I request your fulsome advantages,’ he said.

Harlon Nayl pulled back his hood. ‘Master Unwerth, we have a business proposition for you.’



SOON

Late winter time, Petropolis, Eustis Majoris, 402.M41

‘THAT’S A LOT of trucks,’ Junior Marshal Plyton said, looking down out of the windows of the Department of Special Crimes. Secretary Limbwall scurried over and joined her, peering out at the lorries far below, caught on the rockcrete plaza in a downpour of acid rain. Burn alarms were sounding.

‘Yeah, what are they here for?’ Limbwall said.

Deputy Magistratum First Class Dersk Rickens tapped his way over, leaning hard on his cane. He peered down at what his underlings were looking at.

‘That? That’s the new codifiers they’ve been promising us. Upgraded units, more powerful cogitation. They’ve been shipped from a provider planet.’

Down below, servitors began to unload crated cogitator units from the trucks.

‘Rejoice and be merry,’ Rickens said, walking away. ‘Departmental upgrade. Think yourselves lucky.’

‘Excellent!’ Plyton exclaimed.

Limbwall clapped his hands.

Far below them, elevator banks began to carry the units up to their floor. Boxed, the cogitators they brought were still damp from the humid atmosphere of Spica Maximal.

Excited, Plyton hurried towards the elevators.

On the ledge outside the window, a perching sheen bird watched her go. It blinked.

One perfectly machined mechanical eye opened and closed. It cocked its head. It waited in the pouring acid rain.

Looked back.

And blinked.

THORN WISHES TALON

A RAVENOR STORY

THE PAST NEVER lets us go. It is persistent and unalterable.

The future, however, is aloof, a stranger. It stands with its back to us, mute and private, refusing to communicate what it knows or what it sees.

Except to some. On Nova Durma, deep in the leech-infested forests of the Eastern Telgs, there is a particular grotto into which the light of the rising daystar falls once every thirty-eight days. There, by means of some secret ministry and ritual craft that I have no ready wish to understand, the blistered seers of the Divine Fraternity coax the reluctant future around until they can see its face in their silver mirrors, and hear its hushed, unwilling voice.

It is my fervent hope that what it has to say to them is a lie.

THAT NIGHT, THE waste-world called Malinter had six visitors. They left their transport, dark and hook-winged, on a marshy flood plain, slightly bowed over to starboard where the landing claws had sunk into the ooze. They proceeded west, on foot.

A storm was coming, and it was not entirely natural. They walked through streamers of white fog, crossing outcrops of green quartz, lakes of moss and dank watercourses choked with florid lichens. The sky shone like filthy, tinted glass. In the distance, a pustular range of hills began to vanish in the rain-blur of the encroaching elements. Lightning flashed, like sparks off flint or remote laser fire.

They had been on the surface for an hour, and had just sighted the tower, when the first attempt was made to kill them.

There was a rattle almost indistinguishable from the doom-roll of the approaching thunder, and bullets whipped up spray from the mud at the feet of the tallest visitor.

His name was Harlon Nayl. His tall, broad physique was wrapped in a black-mesh bodyglove. His head was shaved apart from a simple goatee. He raised the heavy Hecuter pistol he had been carrying in his right fist, and made a return of fire into the gathering dark.

In answer, several more unseen hostiles opened up. The visitors scattered for cover.

‘Were you expecting this?’ Nayl asked as he crouched behind a quartz boulder and snapped shots off over it.

+I didn’t know what to expect.+

The answer came telepathically from Nayl’s master, and seemed far from reassuring.

‘How many?’ Nayl called out.

Twenty metres away from him, another big man called Zeph Mathuin shouted back from cover. ‘Six!’ echoed his estimation. Mathuin was as imposing as Nayl, but his skin was dark, the colour of varnished hardwood. His black hair was plaited into strands and beaded. Both men had been bounty hunters in their time. Neither followed that profession any longer.

‘Make it seven,’ contradicted Kara Swole as she wriggled up beside Nayl, keeping her head low. She was a short, compact woman with cropped red hair. Her voluptuous figure was currently concealed beneath a long black leather duster with a fringe of larisel fur around the neck. ‘Seven?’ queried Nayl, as whining hard-round smacked into the far side of the rock. ‘Six!’ Mathuin called again.

Kara Swole had been a dancer-acrobat before she’d joined the band, and ordinarily she would defer to the combat experience of the two ex-hunters. But she had an ear for these things. ‘Listen!’ she said. ‘Three autorifles,’ she identified, counting off on her fingers. ‘Two lasguns, a pistol, and that...’ she drew Nayl’s attention to a distinctive *plunk! plunk!* ‘That’s a stubber.’ Nayl nodded and smiled. ‘Six!’ Mathuin insisted.

+Kara is correct. There are seven. Now can we deal with them, please?+

Their master's mind-voice seemed unusually terse and impatient. Not a good sign. One of several not good signs that had already distinguished this night.

The two other members of the team sheltered against a gravel shelf some distance to Nayl's left. Their names were Patience Kys and Carl Thonius. A slight fussy, well-bred young man, Thonius held the rank of interrogator and was technically the master's second-in-command. He had drawn a compact pistol from inside his beautifully tailored coat but was too busy complaining about the weather, the mud and the prospect of death by gunshot wounds to use it.

Patience Kys suggested he might like to shut up. She was a slender, pale woman, dressed in high leather boots of black leather, a bell skirt of grey silk and an embroidered black leather shirt. Her hair was pinned up in a chignon with silver pins.

She scanned the view ahead, and located one of the hostiles firing from the cover of some quartz rocks. 'Ready?' she yelled over at Nayl. 'Pop 'em up!' he replied.

Kys was telekinetic. She focused her trained mind and exerted a little pressure. The quartz rocks scattered apart across the slime, revealing a rather surprised man holding an autorifle.

His surprise lasted about two seconds until a single shot from Nayl hit him in the brow and tumbled him leadenly onto his back.

With a spiteful grin, Kys reached out again and dragged another of the hostiles out into the open with her mind. The man yelled aloud, scared and uncomprehending. His heels churned in the ooze and he flailed his arms, fighting the invisible force that yanked him by the scruff of the neck.

There was a blurt of noise like an industrial hammer-drill, and the man ceased to be, shredded into pieces by heavy fire.

Mathuin had shot him. His left hand was a burnished-chrome augmetic, and he had locked it into the governing socket of the lethal rotator cannon that he was wearing strapped around his torso. The multi-barrels whirled and cycled, venting vapour.

The firing ceased.

+They have fled for now. They will return, I have no doubt.+

The master of the team moved up amongst them. To the uninformed, Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor appeared to be a machine rather than a man. He was a box, a smoothly angled wedge of armoured metal with a glossy, polished finish from which even the approaching lightning seemed unwilling to reflect. This was his force chair, his life-support system, totally enclosed and self-sufficient. The chair's anti-gravity disks spun hypnotically as he advanced.

Inside that enclosing chair, one of the Imperium's most brilliant inquisitors – and most articulate theorists – lay trapped forever. Years before, at the start of a glittering career in the service of the ordo, Gideon Ravenor had been struck down during a heretical attack, his fair and strong body burned and fused away into a miserable residue of useless flesh. Only his mind had survived.

But such a mind! Sharp, incisive, poetic, just... and powerful too. Kys had not met a psi-capable being remotely strong enough to master Gideon Ravenor.

They were sworn to him, the five of them. Nayl, Thonius, Kara, Mathuin and Kys. Sworn and true. They would follow him to the ends of the known stars, if needs be.

Even when he chose not to tell them where they were going.

THE DIVINE FRATERY practises a barbaric initiation process of voluntary blinding. Sight, as one might expect, is considered their fundamental skill, but not sight as we might understand it. Novices sacrifice one of their eyes as proof of their intent, and have that missing eye replaced by a simple augmetic to maintain everyday function. The one remaining organic eye is then trained and developed, using ritual, alchemic and sorcerous processes.

An initiated member of the Fraternity may therefore be identified by his single augmetic eye, and by the patch of purple velvet that covers his

remaining real eye at all times except for circumstances of cult ceremony. A novitiate, self-blinded in one socket, must work to fashion his own silver mirror before he is allowed his augmetic, or indeed any medical or sterilising treatment. He must cut and hammer his dish of silver, and then work it with abrasive wadding until it is a perfect reflector to a finesse of .0088 optical purity. Many die of septicemia or other wound-related infection before they accomplish this. Others, surviving the initial infections, spend many months or even years finishing the task. Thus, members of the cult may additionally be identified by blistering of the skin, tissue abnormalities and even significant necrotising scarring incurred during the long months of silver-working.

It is also my experience that few Fraternity members have codable or matchable fingerprints. Years of scrupulous endeavour with abrasive wadding wear away hands as well as silver.

OVERHEAD, THE SKY flashed and vibrated. Kara could hear the thunder now, and felt the drizzle in the wind. Fog-vapour smirched out the distance.

With the toe of her boot, she gingerly rolled over the body of the man Nayl had shot. He was dressed in cheap, worn foul-weather clothes made of woven plastek fibre and leather. He had one augmetic eye, crude and badly-sutured into the socket, and a velvet patch over the other.

‘Anyone we know?’ asked Nayl, coming up behind her.

Unlike the others, Nayl and Kara had not been recruited for ordo service by Ravenor himself. They had originally owed loyalty to Ravenor’s mentor, Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn. Somewhere along the line, a decade or more past, they had become Ravenor’s. Kara often thought of Eisenhorn. Stern, fierce, so much harder to bear than Ravenor, Eisenhorn had still been a good man to follow. And she owed him. But for Gregor Eisenhorn, she would still be a dancer-acrobat in the circuses of Bonaventure.

She often wondered what had become of her former master. She'd last seen him back in '87, during the mission to 5213X. He'd been a wreck of a man by then, supported only by his burning will and fundamental augmetics. Some had said he'd crossed a line and become a radical. Kara didn't believe that. Eisenhower had always been so... hard-line. She thought of him fondly, as she did the others from that time. Alizabeth Bequin, God-Emperor rest her, dear Aemos, Medea Betancore and Fischig.

They had known some times together. Great times, bad times. But this was her place now.

'Face doesn't ring any bells,' she said. She reached down and lifted the eye patch, just out of curiosity. A real eye, wide and glazed, lay beneath.

'What the hell is that about?' Nayl wondered.

Kara reached up and sleeked the short, red strands of her rain-wet hair back across her head. She looked across at Mathuin and Thonius beside the other body. Thonius was, as ever, elegantly dressed, and as he crouched in the mud, he fussed about his shoes.

Thonius would Ravenor's pupil, which supposed that one day Thonius was to be promoted to full inquisitor. Ravenor had been Eisenhower's interrogator. Kara wondered sometimes if Carl had anything like the same stuff.

'If you'd left him a little more intact we might have made a more decent examination,' Thonius complained.

'This is a rotator cannon,' Mathuin said bluntly. 'It doesn't do intact.' Thonius prodded the grisly remains with a stick. 'Well, I think we've got an augmetic eye here too. And what's either an eyepatch or a very unsatisfactory posing thong.'

Thonius's caustic wit usually drew smiles from the band, but not this night. No one was in the mood for laughs. Ravenor, generally so forthcoming with his team, had told them virtually nothing about the reasons for coming to Malinter. As far as anyone knew, he'd simply diverted them to this remote waste-world after receiving some private communiqué.

Most alarmingly of all, he'd chosen to join them on the surface. Ravenor usually ran his team telepathically from a distance via the wraithbone markers they all wore. He only came along in person when the stakes were high.

+Let's move on.+ Ravenor said.

THE GROTTO IN the Eastern Telgs is deep in the smoking darkness of the forests. The glades are silent except for insect chitter, and wreathed with vapour and steam. There are biting centipedes everywhere, some as long as a man's finger, others as long as a man's leg. The air stinks of mildew.

Once every thirty-eight days, the rising star comes up at such an angle it forces its pale and famished light in through a natural hole in the rock face outside the grotto. The beams streak in down an eighty degree angle to the azimuth and strike the still freshwater of the pool in the grotto's base, lighting the milky water like a flame behind muslin.

The Fraternity cowers around the pool – after days of ritual starvation and self-flagellation – and attempts to interrupt the falling beams with their silver mirrors. At such times, I have observed, they remove the purple velvet patches from their real eyes and place them over their augmetics.

Their flashing mirrors reflect many colours of light. Having ingested lho seeds and other natural hallucinogenics, they glare into their mirrors, and begin to gabble incoherently.

Voxographic units, run on battery leads, are set around the grotto to record their ramblings. As the light fades again, the masters of the Fraternity play back the vocorders, and tease out the future truths – or lies – that they have been told.

THE TOWER, AS they approached it, was far larger than they had first imagined. The main structure, splintered and ruined, rose a full half kilometre into the dark, bruised sky, like an accusing finger. At the base, like the bole of an ancient tree, it thickened out and spread into great piers and buttresses that anchored it into the headland. Crumbling stone bridge-spans linked the rocky shelf to the nearest piers.

There was no way of defining its origin or age, nor the hands – human or otherwise – that had constructed it. Even its purpose was in doubt. According to the scans, it was the only artificial structure on Malinter. Older star maps referred to it simply by means of a symbol that indicated ruin (antique/xenos).

As they picked their way through ancient screes of rubble and broken masonry towards the nearest span, the rain began to lash down, pattering on the mud and driving off the raised stonework. The rising wind began to shiver the glossy black ivy and climbing vines clinging in thick mats to the lower walls.

‘This message. It told you to come here?’ Nayl asked.

+What message?+

Nayl frowned and looked at the floating chair. ‘The message you got.’

+I never said anything about a message.+

‘Oh, come on! Fair play!’ Nayl growled. ‘Why won’t you tell us what we’re getting into here?’

+Harlon.+ Ravenor’s voice sliced into Nayl’s mind and he winced slightly. Ravenor’s telepathy was sometimes painfully sharp when he was troubled or preoccupied.

Nayl realised that Ravenor’s thought-voice was directed at him alone, a private word the others couldn’t hear.

+Trust me, old friend. I dare tell you nothing until I’m sure of what we’re dealing with. If it turns out to be a trick, you could be biased by misinformation.+

‘I’m no amateur,’ Nayl countered. The others looked at him, hearing only his side of the conversation.

+I know, but you’re a loyal man. Loyalty sometimes blinds us. Trust me on this.+

‘What in the name of the Golden Throne was that?’ Thonius said abruptly. They’d all heard it. Ravenor and Kys had felt it.

High in the ruined summit of the tower, something had screamed. Loud, hideous, inhuman, drawn out. More screams, from other non-human voices, answered it. Each resounded both acoustically and psychically. The air temperature dropped sharply. Sheens of ice crackled into view, caking the upper sweep of the walls.

They moved on a few metres. The keening wails grew louder, whooping and circling within the high walls, as if screaming avian things were flying around inside. As lightning accompanies thunder, so each scream was accompanied by a sympathetic flash of light. The psychic shrieks seemed to draw the storm down, until a halo of flashing, jagged light coruscated in the sky above the tower. Corposant danced along the walls like white, fluorescent balls.

Kys, her psi-sensitive mind feeling it worse than the rest, paused to wipe fresh blood off her lip with the back of her gwel-skin glove. Her nose was bleeding.

As she did so, the hostiles began trying to kill them again.

THE DIVINE FRATERY, may the ordos condemn their sick souls, seek to chart out the future. All possible futures, in fact. With their mirrors and their abominably practiced eyes, they identify events to come, and take special interest in those events that are ill-favoured. Disasters, plagues, invasions, collapses of governments, heresies, famines, defeats in battle. Doom, in any guise.

The masters of the Fraternity then disseminate the details of their oracles to the lower orders of their cult. By my estimation, the Fraternity numbers several thousand, many of them apparently upstanding Imperial citizens, spread through hundreds of worlds in the subsectors Antimar, Helican, Angelus and Ophidian. Once a 'prospect' as they call them has been identified, certain portions of the 'cult membership' are charged with doing everything they can to ensure that it comes to pass, preferably in the worst and most damaging way possible. If a plague is foreseen, then cult members will deliberately break quarantine orders to ensure that the

outbreak spreads. If the prospect is a famine, they will plant incendiary bombs or bio-toxins in the Munitorum grain stores of the threatened world. A heretic emerges? They will protect him and publish his foul lies abroad. An invasion approaches? They are the fifth column who will destroy the defenders from within.

They seek doom. They seek to undermine the fabric of our Imperium, the culture of man, and cause it to founder and fall. They seek galactic apocalypse, an age of darkness and fire, wherein their unholy masters, the Ruinous Powers, can rise up and take governance of all.

Five times now I have thwarted their efforts. They hate me, and wish me dead. Now I seek to derail their efforts a sixth time, here, tonight, on Malinter. I have journeyed far out of my way, pursued by their murder-bands, to carry a warning.

For I have seen their latest prospect with my own eyes. And it is a terrible thing.

LASER FIRE SCORCHED across the mossy span of the bridge arch, sizzling in the rain. Some of it came from the ruin ahead, some from the crags behind them. Stonework shattered and split. Las-bolts and hard-rounds snapped and stung away from the age-polished cobbles.

‘Go!’ yelled Nayl, turning back towards the crags and firing his weapon in a two-handed brace. At his side, Kara Swole kicked her assault weapon into life. It bucked like a living thing, spitting spent casings out in a sideways flurry.

They backed across the bridge as the others ran ahead. Mathuin and Kys led the way, into the gunfire coming out of the dim archways and terraces ahead. Mathuin’s rotator cannon squealed and flames danced around the spinning barrels. Stone debris and shorn ivy fluttered off the wounded walls. Kys saw a man, almost severed at the waist drop from an archway into the lightless gulf below the bridge.

Ravenor and Thonius came up behind them. Thonius was still gazing up at the screamlight tearing and dancing around the tower top overhead. He

had one hand raised, as if to protect his face from the bullets and laser fire whipping around him.+Concentrate!+

‘Yes, yes... of course...’ Thonius replied. Mathuin ran under the first arch into the gloom of the tower chambers. His augmetic eyes, Hide coals of red hard-light, gleaming inside his lids, immediately adjusted to the light conditions and revealed to him the things hidden in the shadows. He pivoted left and mowed down four hostiles with a sustained belch of cannon fire. More shot at him.

Kys ran in beside him. She had a laspistol harnessed at her waist, but she hadn’t drawn it yet. She extended the heels of her palms, and four kineblades slipped out of the sheaths built into the forearms of her shirt. Each was thin, razor-sharp, twelve centimetres long, and lacked handles. She controlled them with her mind, orbiting them about her body in wide, buzzing circuits, in a figure of eight, like some lethal human orrery.

A hostile opened fire directly at her with an autopistol, cracking off four shots. Without flinching, she faced them, circling a pair of the blades so they intercepted and deflected the first two shots. The second two she bent wide with her mind, so that they sailed off harmlessly like swatted flies.

Before he could fire again, Kys pinned the hostile to the stone wall with the third kineblade.

Mathuin was firing again. ‘You okay there, Kys?’ he yelled over the cannon’s roar.

‘Fine,’ she smiled. She was in her element. Dealing death in the name of the Emperor, punishing his enemies. That was all she lived for. She was a secretive being. Patience Kys was not her real name, and none of the band knew what she’d been baptised. She’d been born on Sameter, in the Helican sub, and had grown to womanhood on that filthy, brow-beaten world. Things had happened to her there, things that had changed her and made her Patience Kys, the telekine killer. She never spoke of it. The simple fact was she had faced and beaten a miserable death, and now she was paying death back, in the God-Emperor’s name, with souls more deserving of annihilation.

With a jerk of her mind, she tugged the kineblade out of the pinned corpse and flew it back to join the others. They whistled as they spun, deflecting more gunfire away from her. Five more hostiles lay ahead, concealed behind mouldering pillars. With a nasal grunt, she sped the kineblades away from her. They shot like guided missiles down the terraceway, arcing around obstacles, whipping around the pillars. Four of the hostiles fell, slashed open by the hurtling blades.

The fifth she yanked out of cover with her telekinesis and shot. Now, at last the gun was in her hands.

Inexorable as a planet moving along its given path, Ravenor floated into the gloom, passing between Kys and Mathuin as the ex-bounty hunter hosed further mayhem at the last of the hostiles on his side. Thonius ran up alongside him.

‘What now?’ the interrogator asked hopefully. ‘At least we’re out of that ghastly rain.’

Screamlight echoed and flashed down through the tower from far above, reverberating the structure to its core. Kys shuddered involuntarily. Her nose was bleeding again.

+Carl? Zeph?+

Ravenor’s mind-voice was quiet, as if he too was suffering the side-effects of the psychic screams.+Rearguard, please. Make sure Kara and Harlon make it in alive.+

‘But—’ Thonius complained. Mathuin was already running back to the archway.

+Do as I say, Carl!+

‘Yes, inquisitor,’ replied Thonius. He turned and hurried after Mathuin.

+With me, please. Patience.+

Kys had just retrieved her kineblades. She held out her arms to let them slide back into her cuff-sheaths. The concentrated activity had drained her telekinetic strength, and the terrible screamlight from above had sapped her badly.

+Are you up to this?+

Kys raised her laspistol. 'I was born up for this, Gideon,' she grinned.

THE PROSPECT IS, as most are, vague. There are no specifics. However, it is regarded as a one hundred per cent certainty by the masters of the Fraternity that a daemoniac abomination is about to be manifested into the material universe. This, they predict, will come to pass between the years 400 and 403.M41. Emperor protect us, it may have already happened.

There are some details. The crucial event that triggers the manifestation will happen on Eustis Majoris, the overcrowded and dirty capital world of the Angelus subsector, within those aforementioned dates. It may, at the time, seem a minor event, but its consequences will be vast. Hundreds may die. Thousands... mayhap millions, if it is not stopped.

The daemon will take human form and walk the worlds of the Imperium undetected. It has a name. Phonetically 'SLIITE' or perhaps Slyte or Slight.

It must be stopped. Its birth must be prevented.

All I have done in my long career in service of the ordos, all I have achieved... will be as nothing if this daemon comes into being.

'IT'S GETTING A little uncomfortable out here,' Nayl remarked. A las-shot had just scored across the flesh of his upper arm, but he didn't even wince.

'Agreed,' said Kara, ejecting another spent clip onto the cobbles of the span and slamming in a fresh one.

They'd been backing steadily under fire, and now the archway was tantalisingly close.

They both ducked their heads instinctively as heavy fire ripped out of the archway behind them and peppered the landwards-end of the bridge span. Mathuin was covering them at last.

They turned and ran into cover, bullets and lasfire chasing their heels.

Inside the archway, Thonius was waving them in. Mathuin's cannon ground dry and he paused to pop out the ammo drum and slap in a fresh one from the heavy pouches around his waist.

Nayl bent in the shadows and reloaded his pistol quickly, expertly. He looked up and stared out into the torrential rain. Out there, in the dark of the storm and the swiftly falling night, he counted at least nine muzzle flashes barking their way.

‘How many?’ he asked.

This time, Mathuin didn’t answer. He turned his stony, hard light gaze towards Kara and raised an eyebrow.

‘Fifteen,’ she said at once.

‘Fifteen,’ mused Nayl. ‘That’s five each.’

‘Hey!’ said Thonius. ‘There are four of us here!’

‘I know,’ Nayl grinned. ‘But it’s still five each. Unless you intend to surprise us.’

‘You little bastard,’ snapped Thonius. He raised his weapon and pinked off several shots at enemy across the span.

‘Hmmm...’ said Nayl. ‘Still fifteen.’

+Kara. Can you join us?+

‘On my way, boss,’ said Kara Swole. She grinned at Nayl. ‘Can you deal here? I mean, now it’s seven and a half each.’

‘Get on,’ Nayl said. He started firing. Kara dashed off into the darkness behind them.

Thonius blasted away again. They all saw a hostile on the far side of bridge, through the rain, tumble and pitch off the crag. ‘There!’ Thonius said triumphantly. ‘Seven each then,’ Mathuin remarked to Nayl.

THE DIVINE FRATERY, as I have learned, find it particularly easy to identify in their prospects others who have dabbled in farseeing and clairvoyance. It is as if such individuals somehow illuminate their life courses by toying with the future. The bright track of one has attracted their particular attention. It is through him, and the men and women around him, that the prospect of the manifestation has come to light.

He will cause it. Him, or one of those close to him.

*That is why I have taken it upon myself to warn him.
For he is my friend. My pupil. My interrogator.*

KYS HADN'T EVEN seen or sensed the cultists behind the next archway. Ravenor, gliding forward without hesitation, pulped all four of them with his chair's built-in psi-cannons.

Kys followed him, striding forward through lakes of leaking blood and mashed tissue. She was worn out. The constant screams were getting to her.

They heard footfalls behind them. Kara Swole ran into view. Kys lowered her weapon.

'You called for me?'

+Indeed I did, Kara. I can't get up there.+

Kara looked up into the gloomy rafters and beams above them.

'No problem.' She took off her coat. Beneath it she was dressed in a simple matt-green bodyglove.

'Hey, Kar. Luck,' called Kys.

Kara smiled.

She limbered up for a moment and then leapt up into the rafters, gripping the mouldering wood and gaining momentum.

Rapidly, all her acrobat skills coming back to her, she ascended, hand over hand, leaping from beam to beam, defying the dreadful gulf beneath her.

She was getting increasingly close to the flitting source of the screamlight. Her pulse raced. Grunting, she somersaulted again, and landed on her feet on a crossmember. Kara stood for a moment, feeling the streaming rain slick down over her from the tower's exposed roof. She stuck out her hands for balance, the assault weapon tightly cinched close under her bosom.

There was a light above her, shining out from a stairless doorway in the shell of the tower. Faint artificial light, illuminating the millions of

raindrops as they hurtled down the empty tower shaft towards her. ‘Seeing this?’ she asked. +Yes, Kara.+ ‘What you expected?’ +I have no idea.+

‘Here goes,’ she said and jumped into space, into rainfall, into air. A hesitation, on the brink dark depths below her. Then she seized a rotting timber beam and swung, her fingers biting deep into the damp, flaking wood.

She pivoted in the air, and flew up into the doorway, feet first. She landed firmly, balanced, arms wide. A figure stood before her in the ruined tower room, illuminated by a single hovering glow-globe. ‘Hello Kara,’ the figure said. ‘It’s been a long time.’ She gasped. ‘Oh God-Emperor... my master...’ The man was tall, shrouded in a dark leather coat that did not quite conceal the crude augmetics supporting his frame. His head was bald, his eyes dark-rimmed. He leaned heavily on a metal staff.

Rainwater streaming off him, Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn gazed at her.

DOWN AT THE archway, Thonius recoiled in horror. ‘I think we have a problem,’ he said.

‘Don’t be such a pussy,’ Nayl said.

‘Actually, I think he might be right,’ said Mathuin. ‘That’s not good, is it?’

Nayl craned his neck to look. Something blocky and heavy was striding towards them over the bridge span. It was metal and solid, machined striding limbs hissing steam from piston bearings. Its arms were folded against the sides of its torso like the wings of a flightless bird. Those arms, each one a heavy lascannon, began to cough and spit. Massive hydraulic absorbers soaked up the recoil.

The archway collapsed in a shower of exploding masonry. Nayl, Thonius and Mathuin fled back into the cover of the gallery behind.

‘Emperor save me,’ Nayl exclaimed. ‘They’ve got a bloody dreadnought!’

RAINWATER DRIPPED OFF Eisenhower's nose. 'Gideon? Is he with you, Kara?' he asked.

'Yes, he is,' she stammered. 'Throne, it's good to see you.'

'And you, my dear. But it's important I speak to Gideon.'

Kara nodded. 'Ware me,' she said.

Far away, down below, Ravenor heard her. Kara Swole stiffened, her eyes clouding. The wraithbone pendant at her throat glowed with a dull, ethereal light.

She wasn't Kara Swole any more. Her body was possessed by the mind of Gideon Ravenor.

'Hello, Gregor,' Kara's mouth said.

'Gideon. Well met. I was worried you wouldn't come.'

'And ignore a summons from my mentor? Phrased in Glossia? "Thorn wishes Talon..." I was hardly going to ignore that.'

'I thought you would appreciate a taste of the old, private code,' said Eisenhower. His frozen face failed to show the smile he was feeling.

'How could I forget it Thorn? You drummed it into me.'

Eisenhower nodded. 'Much effort getting here?'

Kara's lips conveyed Ravenous words. 'Some. An effort made to kill us. Nayl is holding them off at the gateway to the tower.'

'Old Harlon, eh?' Eisenhower said. 'Ever dependable. You've got a good man there, Gideon. A fine man. Give him my respects. And Kara too, best there is.'

'I know, Gregor.' A strangely intense expression that wasn't her own appeared on Kara's face. 'I think it's time you told me why you brought me here.'

'Yes, it is. But in person, I think. That would be best. That way you can stop subjecting Kara to that effort of puppeting. And we can be more private. I'll come down to you.'

'How? There are no stairs.'

‘The same way I got up here,’ Eisenhower said. He looked upwards, into the rain hosing down through the broken roof.

‘Cherubael?’ he whispered.

Something nightmarish up in the strobing screamlight answered him.

ITS PITTED STEEL hull glossy with rain, the dreadnought machine strode in through the shattered archway. The booming storm threw its hulking shadow a hundred jagging directions at once with its lightning. Its massive cannon pods pumped pneumatically as they retched out streams of las-bolts. The weapons made sharp, barking squeals as they discharged, a repeating note louder than the storm.

Behind it, three dozen armed brethren of the Divine Fraternity charged across the bridge span.

Stone split and fractured under the bombardment. Pillars that had stood for eons teetered and collapsed like felled trees, spraying stone shards out across the terrace flooring.

Nayl, Mathuin and Thonius retreated back into the empty inner chambers of the ruined tower. Even Mathuin’s rotator couldn’t so much as dent the dreadnought’s armour casing.

‘Someone really, really wants us dead,’ Thonius said.

‘Us... or the person we came here to meet,’ Nayl countered. They hurried down a dim colonnade and Nayl shoved both his comrades into the cover of a side arcade as cannon fire – bright as sunbursts – sizzled down the chamber.

‘Golden Throne! There’s got to be something we can try!’ Nayl said.

Mathuin reached into his coat pocket and pulled out three close-focus frag grenades. He held them like a market-seller would hold apples or ploins. It was just like Mathuin to bring a pocket full of explosives. He never felt properly dressed unless he was armed to the back teeth.

‘Don’t suppose you’ve got a mini-nuke in the other pocket?’ asked Thonius.

‘My other suit’s at the cleaners,’ Mathuin replied.

‘They’ll have to do,’ said Nayl. ‘We’ll go with what we’ve got.’ He looked round. They could hear the heavy clanking footfalls of the dreadnought bearing down on them, the hiss of its hydraulic pistons, the whirr of its motivators.

‘They may not even crack the thing’s plating,’ Mathuin remarked. As well as a supply of ridiculous ordnance, Zeph Mathuin could always be relied on for copious pessimism.

‘We’ll have to get them close,’ said Thonius.

‘We?’ said Nayl. He’d already taken one of the grenades and was weighing it up like a ball.

‘Yes, Mr Nayl. We.’ Thonius took another of the grenades, holding it between finger and thumb like it was a potentially venomous insect. He really wasn’t comfortable with the physicality of fighting. Thonius could hack cogitators and archive stacks faster than any of them, and could rewrite codes that any of the rest didn’t even understand. He was Ravenor’s interrogator because of his considerable intellect, not his killing talents. That’s why Ravenor employed the likes of Nayl and Mathuin. ‘Three of us, three bombs,’ Thonius stated. ‘We’re all in this together. I’m not going to be pulped by that thing without having a go at stopping it myself.’

Nayl looked dubiously at Mathuin.

‘It’s not up for debate, you vulgarians,’ Thonius said snottily. ‘Don’t make me remind you I’m technically in charge here.’

‘Oh, that would explain why we’re technically nose deep in crap,’ Nayl said.

A thick section of stone wall blew in nearby, hammered to fragments by withering cannon fire. The massive weight of the dreadnought crushed heat-brittled stone into dust as it stomped through the gap.

The trio began to run again, down the next terrace, trying to put some distance between them and the killing machine.

‘Get ahead!’ Mathuin said. ‘I’ll take the first pop.’ Nayl nodded and grabbed hold of Thonius, who was still puzzling over his grenade, figuring

out how to adjust the knurled dial to set the timer. Nayl got the interrogator into cover.

Thonius straightened his sleeves. 'If you've pulled my coat out of shape, Nayl...' he began.

Nayl glared at him.

Behind them, in the open, Mathuin primed his grenade and turned. As the dreadnought hove into view, he hurled the small, black charge.

KARA REJOINED RAVENOR and Kys like an ape, swinging down through the rafters and leaping the last few metres.

Eisenhorn descended after her. He was being carried by a grotesque figure, a human shape twisted and distended by arcane forces. The thing glowed with an eldritch inner light. Its bare limbs and torso were covered with runes and sigils. Chains dragged from its ankles.

It set Eisenhorn's heavy, cumbersome form down on the flagstones.

'Thank you, Cherubael,' he said.

The thing, its head lolling brokenly, exposed its teeth in a dreadful smile. 'That's all? I can go back now?' it said. Its voice was like sandpaper on glass. 'There are many more phantoms up there to burn.'

'Go ahead,' Eisenhorn said.

The dreadful daemonhost zoomed back aloft into the rain-swept heights of the min. At once, the ghastly screaming began again. Light pulsed and flashed.

Eisenhorn faced Ravenor's chair. 'The Fraternity has unleashed everything they have tonight to stop me. To stop me talking to you. Daemonhosts of their own. Cherubael has been battling them. I think he's enjoying it.'

'He?' said Ravenor via his chair's voxsponder. 'Last we met, you called that thing an "it", my master.'

Eisenhorn shrugged. His augmetics sighed with the gesture. 'We have reached an understanding. Does that shock you, Gideon?'

'Nothing shocks me any more,' said Ravenor.

‘Good,’ said Eisenhorn. He looked at Kara and Kys.

‘We need a moment, Kara. If you and your friend wouldn’t mind.’

‘Patience Kys,’ Kys said, stern and hard.

‘I know who you are,’ said Eisenhorn, and turned away with Ravenor. In a low voice he began to tell his ex-pupil all he knew about the Divine Fraternity.

‘Kar... that’s Eisenhorn?’ Kys whispered to Kara as they watched the figures withdraw.

‘Yes,’ replied Kara. She was still rather stunned by the meeting, and Ravenor’s brief waring had left her tired.

‘Everything you and Harlon have said about him... I expected...’

‘What?’

‘Something more intimidating. He’s just a broken old man. And I can’t think why he consorts with a Chaos-filth thing like that host-form.’

Kara shrugged. ‘I don’t know about the daemonhost. He fought it and hated it for so long, and then... I dunno. Maybe he’s become the radical they say. But you’re wrong. About him being a broken old man. Well, he’s broken and he’s old... but I’d rather go up against Ravenor unarmed than ever cross Gregor Eisenhorn.’

MATHUIN’S GRENADE EXPLODED. The aim had been good, but the device had bounced oddly at the last moment and had gone off beneath the striding dreadnought. The machine paced on through the ball of fire, untroubled.

Mathuin dived for cover as the cannons began pumping again.

‘Crap... my turn, I suppose,’ said Nayl. He clicked the setter to four seconds, thumbed the igniter, and ran out into the hallway, bowling the grenade underarm.

Then he threw himself into shelter.

The grenade bounced once, lifted with the spin Nayl had put on it, and smacked bluntly against the front shell of the dreadnought.

It was just rebounding off when it detonated.

The dreadnought vanished in a sheet of flame that boiled down the hallway, compressed and driven by the walls and roof.

As it cleared, Thonius saw the dreadnought. Its front was scorched, but it was far, far from dead.

‘Damn. Just me then,’ he said.

‘YOU’VE DABBLED IN farseeing,’ Eisenhorn said. ‘I know that. Your time spent with the eldar drew you in that direction.’

‘I won’t deny it,’ Ravenor replied.

‘That makes you bright to the Fraternity,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘It illuminates you in the interwoven pathways of the future. That’s why they located you in their prospects.’

Ravenor was quiet for a moment. ‘And you’ve come all this way, risked all this danger... to warn me?’

‘Of course.’

‘I’m flattered.’

‘Don’t be, Gideon. You’d do the same for me.’

‘I’m sure I would. But what you’re telling me is... crazy.’

Eisenhorn bowed his head and ran the fingers of his right hand up and down the cold grip of his runestaff.

‘Of course it sounds crazy,’ he said. ‘But it’s true. I ask you this... if you don’t believe me, why are these cultist fools trying so hard to prevent our meeting here tonight? They know it’s true. They want you denied of this warning.’

‘That I will trigger this manifestation? This daemon-birth?’

‘You, or one close to you. The trigger point is something that happens on Eustis Majoris.’

Within his force chair, Ravenor was numb. ‘I won’t lie Gregor. My current investigations focus on that world. I was en route to Eustis Majoris when I diverted to meet you here. But I have no knowledge of this *Slight*.

It hasn't figured in any of my research. I can't believe that something I will do... or something one of my band will do... will—' 'Gideon, I can't believe my only ally these days is a daemonhost Fate surprises us all.'

'So what should I do, now you've warned me? Abandon my investigations on Eustis? Shy away from that world in the hope that by avoiding it I can also avoid this prophecy?' Eisenhower's face was in shadow. 'Maybe you should.' 'No' said Ravenor. 'What I should be is careful. Careful in my own actions, careful to oversee the actions of my team. If there is truth in the Fraternity's prophecy, it is surely bound up in the dire conspiracy I am just now uncovering on Eustis Majoris. But I must prosecute that case. I would be failing in the duty you charged me with if I didn't. After all, the future is not set. We make it, don't we?' 'I think we do. I hope we do.'

'Gregor, when have either of us shirked from serving the Throne just because we're afraid things might go bad? We are inquisitors, we seek. We do not hide.'

Eisenhower raised his head and let the falling rain drops patter off his upraised palm. 'Gideon, I came to warn you, nothing else. I never expected you to change your course. Now, at least, you aware of a "might be". You can be ready for it. That's all I wanted.'

Far behind them, the sound of rapid cannon-fire and dull explosions echoed through the tower.

'I think the time for conversation is over,' said Eisenhower.

THONIUS'S POCKETS WERE not full of munitions and ordnance like Mathuin's, but he reached into them anyway. In one, a mini-cogitator, in another, two data-slates. In a third, a clasped leather case in which he had wrapped his tools: files, data-pins, fine brushes, tubes of lubricant, a vial of adhesive, pliers and tweezers. All the bric-a-brac that aided him in conquering and tinkering with cogitators and codifiers. 'Carl! Get into cover!' Nayl was yelling. Thonius slid out the vial of adhesive and wiped

the drooling nozzle down the side of the grenade ball, waiting a moment for it to get contact-tacky.

Then, taking a deep breath, he leapt out of cover into the face of the dreadnought and lobbed the grenade. It hit the front casing, and adhered there, stuck fast.

Mathuin threw himself out of cover and tackled Thonius, bringing him down behind a pillar. The grenade exploded.

‘You see?’ said Thonius. You see how *thinking* works?’

But the dreadnought wasn’t finished. The blast had split its belly plates, but it was still moving, still striding still firing. Thonius shrugged. ‘Okay... we’re dead.’ The dreadnought suddenly stopped blasting. It faltered. A chill swept over the chamber.

Ravenor’s chair slid into view, heading towards the killer machine. With the force of his mind, he had momentarily jammed its weapons.

Sudden frost coated the walls, Ravenor’s chair and the dreadnought. The machine tried to move. Cycling mechanisms shuddered as it attempted to clear its guns.

A tall figure strode past Ravenor, heading for the dreadnought. It held a runestaff in one hand and a drawn sword in the other. Its robes fluttered out behind it stiff with ice. ‘Holy Terra!’ exclaimed Nayl. ‘Eisenhorn?’ A second before Ravenor’s mental grip failed, a second before the cannons resumed their murderous work, Eisenhorn swung the sword – Barbarisater – and cleft the dreadnought in two. The sword-blade ripped along the fissure Thonius’s cunning grenade had put in it.

Eisenhorn turned aside and shielded his face as the dreadnought combusted.

He looked back at them all, terrible and majestic, back-lit by flames. ‘Shall we?’ he said.

WITH THEIR DREADNOUGHT gone, the remainder of the Fraternity force fled. The warband and the two inquisitors slaughtered many as they made their escape into the storm.

Tugging one of her kineblades out of a body with her mind, Kys watched Eisenhorn ripping his way through the faltering hostiles around them.

‘Now I see what you mean,’ she said to Kara Swole.

‘I’M DONE HERE,’ Gregor Eisenhorn said. He looked back across the bridge span to the tower. Screamlight was still dancing around the summit. ‘Cherubael needs my help now. I should go and see how he’s doing.’

‘I will be vigilant,’ Ravenor said.

Eisenhorn knelt and pressed his gnarled hands flat against the side of the chair.

‘The Emperor go with you. I’ve said my piece. It’s up to you now, Gideon.’

Eisenhorn rose and looked at the others. ‘Mamzel Kys. Interrogator. Mr Mathuin. A pleasure meeting you.’ He nodded to each of them. ‘Kara?’

She smiled. ‘Gregor.’

‘Never a hardship seeing you. Look after Gideon for me.’

‘I will.’

Eisenhorn looked at Harlon Nayl and held out a hand. Nayl clasped it with both of his.

‘Harlon. Like old times.’

‘Emperor protect you, Gregor.’

‘I hope so,’ Eisenhorn said, and walked away, back across the bridge span towards the tower where the screamlight still flashed and sparked. They knew they would not see him again. Unless the future was not as set as it seemed.

MALINTER FELL. AWAY below them, vast and silent. Nayl piloted the transport up into low orbit flashing out signals to their ship.

Once the nav was set and automatics had taken over, he turned his chair on its pivot and looked at Ravenor.

‘He wasn’t the same,’ he said.

+How do you mean?+

‘He seemed so sane I thought he was mad.’

+Yes. I thought that too. It’s hard to know whether I should believe him.+

‘About what?’

+About the dangers ahead, Harlon. The risks we may take.+

‘So... what do we do?’

+We carry on. We do our best. We serve the Emperor of Mankind. If what Gregor said comes to pass, we deal with it. Unless you have a better idea.’

‘Not a one,’ replied Nayl, turning back to study the controls.

+Good.+ sent Ravenor, and wheeled his chair around, returning to the cabin space behind where the others were gathered.

Nayl sighed and looked ahead at the turning starfields.

The future lay ahead, its back to them, saying nothing.

RAVENOR RETURNED

‘Words not deeds’

— Dedication over the main entrance of the Administry Tower, Formal
A, Petropolis.

‘In the prosecution of his work, an agent of the Holy Inquisition may display a badge of office, which shall be a rosette bearing a crimson sigil. This may be further inscribed with the mark of his affiliated ordo or the code of his issuing officio planetia. It is his symbol of authority, stark and unequivocal.

‘Under certain circumstances, an agent of the Holy Inquisition may elect instead to carry the mark of Special Condition, which shall be a rosette bearing an azure sigil. This denotes the bearer to be operating alone, beyond the resource or support of any ordo: rogue, driven to independence by extremis, who will act with singular devotion, and recognise no law or master save the God-Emperor himself.’

— from the Inquisition’s *Rubric of Protocol*.



THEN

Just after Firetide, Bonner's Reach, Lucky Space, 402.M41

‘YOU.’

The voice was so low, so very, very deep, the single word resounded like a seismic rumble. A curious hush fell across the vast free trade salon. People began to look. Some picked up their drinks and moved away. They knew what this was.

The implanted eyes of all the Vigilants present also turned to stare at the confrontation, green and cold. But they would not intervene. Not unless the Code of the Reach was broken.

‘You,’ the voice repeated.

To his credit, the man in the lizard-skin coat had not turned around. He was sitting at one of the high tables, conducting some business with a pair of far traders. The traders both looked up nervously at the figure standing behind the man in the lizard-skin coat.

‘I... I think you’re being addressed,’ one of them muttered.

‘I’ve no business with anyone here except you two gentlemen,’ the man in the lizard-skin coat said loudly. He picked up one of the napkins on which the traders had just been scribbling cost estimates. ‘Now this figure here seems very high—’

The far traders pushed back their chairs and stood up. ‘Our business is done,’ one of them said stiffly. ‘We don’t want to get involved in... whatever this is.’

The man in the lizard-skin coat tutted and got to his feet. ‘Sit down,’ he told the traders. ‘Order another flask of amasec from the tenders on my account. I’ll just deal with this and we can resume.’

He turned around. Slowly, he lifted his gaze until he was looking up at the face of the man who had interrupted his meeting.

Lucius Worna had been in the bounty game for fifteen decades, and every second of those savage years showed in his face. His head, shaved apart from a bleached stripe, was one big scar. Livid canyons split through his lips and eyebrows, and formed white ridges on his cheeks and jawline. His ears and nose were just eroded stubs of gristle. The blemish of old wounds overlaid one another, scar tissue upon scar tissue. The carapace armour he wore had been polished until it shone like mother-of-pearl. Even without its plated bulk, he would have been a big man.

‘I have a warrant,’ Lucius Worna declared.

‘You must be very pleased,’ the man in the lizard-skin coat said.

‘For you.’

‘I don’t think so,’ the man in the lizard-skin coat said, and began to turn away again.

Lucius Worna raised his left paw and displayed the warrant slate. The hololithic image of a man’s head appeared in front of it and gently revolved.

‘Armand Wessaen. Two hundred seventy-eight counts, including fraud, malpractice, embezzlement, illegal trading, mutilation and mass murder.’

The man in the lizard-skin coat pointed one lean, well-manicured finger at the slate’s image. ‘If you think that looks remotely like me, you’re not very good at your job.’

Behind him, the far traders chuckled. ‘Get on your way, bounty,’ one of them said as his confidence returned. ‘Any fool can see that’s not our friend here.’

Lucius Worna kept staring at the man in the lizard-skin coat. ‘This face is Wessaen’s birth-face. He has changed it many times, in order to evade the authorities. He escaped death row incarceration on Hesperus and absconded from that planet by smuggling himself offworld a piece at a time.’

‘I think you’ve had too much to drink,’ one of the traders laughed.

‘I don’t really care what you think,’ replied Worna. ‘I know what I know. Armand Wessaen had himself physically disassembled by a black market surgeon on Hesperus. His component parts – hands, eyes, limbs, organs – were grafted onto couriers, hired mules, who conveyed them off planet. Wessaen himself, wearing a body made up of all the transplants removed from said mules, followed them. He later slaughtered the mules instead of paying them what he’d promised, and harvested his component parts back, reassembling himself. All except... the face. There’s one mule still to find, isn’t there, Wessaen? That’s why you’re trying to arrange passage to Sarum.’

Worna glanced sideways at the far traders. ‘That’s what’s he’s after, isn’t it? Passage to Sarum?’

The traders looked at each other. One nodded, slowly.

This really is nonsense,’ the man in the lizard-skin coat smirked. ‘My name is Dryn Degemyni, and I’m a legitimate businessman. Your suggestion is... is little short of farce. I cut myself apart, did I? Posted myself offworld, bit by bit, attached to others, and now I’m sewn back together?’ He laughed. Some onlookers sniggered too.

‘Not sewn. Surgically rebonded. A process paid for by the four hundred thousand crowns you embezzled from the Imperial Guard Veterans’ Association on Hesperus while you were acting as their treasurer. They sponsored this bounty, as did the families of the mules you used and killed.’

‘You’re just annoying me now,’ said the man in the lizard-skin coat. ‘Go away.’

Lucius Worna adjusted the setting of the warrant slate. The headshot changed. ‘Just the face left. And this is the face of the mule you used to smuggle your features out.’

The far traders suddenly began to back away. The hololithic image now plainly showed a perfect match for the face of the man in the lizard-skin coat.

The man sighed sadly, as if all the air had drained out of him, and bowed his head.

‘Armand Wessaen,’ Worna intoned. ‘I have a warrant for your—’

The man in the lizard-skin coat flicked out his right arm and stabbed the bounty hunter in the face. Lucius Worna recoiled slightly and dropped the warrant slate. The flesh of his right cheek was sliced open to the bone. There was blood everywhere.

A shocked murmur ran through the onlookers. No one quite understood what had just happened. They’d barely seen the man in the lizard-skin coat move, let alone produce a weapon.

With a resigned shrug, ignoring the terrible wound, Lucius Worna lunged at his quarry.

Wessaen darted aside, easily avoiding his big, clumsy opponent. He moved like quicksilver, and as he ducked under Worna’s reaching arms, he lashed out with a sideways kick.

This should have been as successful as kicking a Baneblade. Wessaen was slender and unarmoured. It seemed insanity for him to try and take on a giant in a suit of powered battle plate in close combat.

But the kick connected, and Lucius Worna was flung sideways, thrown by a force even his suit’s inertial dampers couldn’t deal with. He crashed into the high table, knocking over the drinks and two of the chairs. Then the man in the lizard-skin coat was on his back, right hand raised to strike at the nape of Worna’s neck.

Just for an instant, the onlookers glimpsed that hand and understood. It was folded open, like the petals of a flower, hinged apart between the middle and ring fingers. A double-edged blade poked from the aperture. A graft weapon. An implant. The hideously folded fingers seemed to form a hilt for the blade.

Worna reached around, grabbed the shoulder of the lizard-skin coat, and flung the man over his head.

The man somersaulted in mid-air, controlled his fall, and bounced feet first off the far end of the high table with enough force to slam the table’s

opposite edge up into Worna's chin. Worna staggered back. Wessaen landed on the salon floor and renewed his attack.

The onlookers in the free trade salon crowded in closer, astonished by what they were witnessing. Some of them had seen the bounty hunter at work before. You didn't mess with that, not hand-to-hand, unless you were crazy, or suicidal or—

Or something else entirely.

Something laced with grafts and glands and implants. Something so augmetically re-engineered it would take on a monster without hesitation. In any fight, there was an underdog. Despite all physical appearances to the contrary, that underdog was Lucius Worna.

This was something the crowd wanted a ringside seat to see.

Worna threw two heavy punches at the man in the lizard-skin coat. Each one would have demolished his skull if it had connected. But Armand Wessaen seemed to slide out around them, leaving empty air. He landed two strikes of his own: his graft blade slit through Worna's left eyebrow, and his left fist actually dented the mother-of-pearl surface of Worna's chest plate.

Worna stumbled away from the force of the blows.

Wessaen's left hand produced a cisor from the pocket of the lizard-skin coat. The warmth of his hand woke the large, black beetle-thing up, and its exposed mandibles, razor-sharp, began to chitter and thrash.

'You've picked on the wrong man tonight,' he hissed as he came in again.

Worna swung around. Again, his punch hit nothing but space. Wessaen had danced nimbly to the left, and stabbed the graft blade up under Worna's left shoulder guard. He tugged the blade out, escaping the blind retaliation. Now blood was spurting down the bounty hunter's left bicep guard.

Worna pivoted at the hips and clawed at his adversary. Wessaen backed away with abnormal speed, executed a deft tumble, and came back on his feet behind his cumbersome opponent. The cisor ripped into Worna's lumbar plating, the mandibles chewing through it like it was tissue paper.

Worna pulled away, but no matter how tightly he turned, he was just a thundering hulk in heavy armour, and Wessaen was always behind him, jittery-fast. Wessaen was glanding something potent, and hyperactivity pulsed through his hard-wired, reconstructed body.

Worna made another desperate grab. Wessaen kicked him in the face, and then followed the kick with another stab of the graft blade. The blade punched through the bounty hunter's midriff armour.

Where it stuck fast.

Wessaen swallowed.

Worna grabbed the man in the lizard-skin coat by the right wrist and wrenched the graft blade out of his belly. As the cisor chattered in, Worna caught that wrist too.

Wessaen's eyes went glassy-wide. Glanding, he was faster than the massive bounty hunter, and almost as strong. Almost.

Straggling, Worna raised the man's right wrist until the graft blade was in front of his face. They were locked, quivering with matched fury. Worna slowly leaned his head forward.

And bit the graft blade in half.

Wessaen squealed. Lucius Worna laughed, a deep booming laugh, and spat the broken blade out of his mouth. He let go of Wessaen's right hand and yanked on the other wrist, straightening Wessaen's left arm as he brought his free fist up under it.

The left elbow of the man in the lizard-skin coat snapped the wrong way with a bone-crack that made the onlookers wince.

The cisor fell onto the floor, and began to eat the carpet. Wessaen started to squeal again, but the squeal ended abruptly as Worna's right hand punched him in the face and sent him flying across the floor.

'End of story,' said Lucius Worna.

Oblivious to the blood streaming from his wounds, Worna clanked towards the fallen man. Wessaen lay in a twisted heap, his broken arm limp and dislocated like a snapped twig. He was moaning, blood pattering from his mashed lips.

‘I have a warrant,’ Worna boomed, his voice like tectonic plates scraping together.

Closing his bitten-off graft weapon so that his hand refolded, Wessaen fumbled into his lizard-skin coat and wrapped his fingers around the summoning whistle.

His last resort.

It had cost him a fortune, more than all his body enhancements in fact, and he’d not used it before. But he knew what it did. And if there ever was a moment for it, this was it.

It wasn’t actually a whistle. It was a smooth piece of rock that had been hollowed out by a technology unknown to the Imperium. But blowing through it was the only way a human could activate it.

Wessaen blew.

All the onlookers winced. Glasses shattered on the salon tables. The huge bio-lumin tank-lights suspended in clusters from the salon’s high roof flickered. Every freetrader in the chamber fell down, ears bleeding.

Ten metres from Armand Wessaen, the nature of space-time buckled and popped apart. The surface of the air itself bubbled and began dripping, like the emulsion of an old tintype pict exposed to flame. A seething, iridescent vortex, whisked up from molten, pustular matter, yawned into being, and the hound stepped out of it.

Just a skeleton at first, dry-clicking into view. Then, as it came on, organs materialised inside its ribcage, blood systems wrote themselves into being, muscle grew, sinews, flesh. It solidified, clothing its reeking, yellow bones in meat.

It was hyenid in structure, its forelimbs long, its back sloping off to short hind legs. Its skull was massive, with a pincer jaw and long yellow fangs that could shred anything, even a man in ceramite armour. It stood two metres tall at the hunched shoulders.

Its eyes were white, the hair on its hunchback a bristly black.

The eager onlookers now recoiled. The traders and merchants in the salon began to flee in blind panic, along with the tenders. Not just from the sight

of the monster, but also from the smell of it. The gross stink of the warp.

Worna turned to face it, drawing an execution sword from his harness. He knew it would be over fast, just as well as he knew the outcome wouldn't favour him.

Wessaen began to laugh, despite his injuries. 'You picked on the wrong man, you frigger! The wrong man!'

The vortex faded. Now fully manifest, the hound padded forward, about to spring, intent on the prey it had been summoned to destroy.

The Vigilants swarmed onto it from all sides, lashing into it with their hand-and-a-half-swords. Blades rained and sliced. The hound coiled and turned, but by then it was already too late. In less than twenty seconds, the Vigilants had hacked it into bloody slabs and shreds.

The Vigilants turned, as one, to face Worna. In unison, they rested their bloodstained swords on the floor, tip-down, their hands folded over the pommels.

'Oh, Throne, no...' gurgled the man in the lizard-skin coat.

'Code,' Worna said. 'The Code of the Reach. No weapon is permitted that has a range longer than a human arm. And *that* came from more than an arm's reach away.'

Worna picked up the cisor. It wriggled in his hand, cluttering. 'The mule wants his face back,' he said.

And that was when the man in the lizard-skin coat really learned to scream.

'HOLY THRONE,' REMARKED Ornales. 'I honestly don't think we need a piece of that.'

The free trade salon stank of blood, and other things less savoury. Under the watchful gaze of the Vigilants, tenders were hosing the floor down. A few traders had been lured back in with the promise of free drinks. Business was still business at Bonner's Reach.

'No, I think we do,' Siskind told his first officer.

'His type comes with trouble.'

‘Only for the ones he’s going after,’ said Siskind. ‘Come on.’

‘What do you want?’ asked Lucius Worna, barely looking up as they approached. He was just finishing packing the various tagged and numbered pieces of Armand Wessaen into the individual cryo-caskets his servitors held ready.

‘I want to retain your services,’ Siskind said.

Worna straightened up and looked at the ship captain directly. ‘You sure? Some people don’t like what they get. If this is a midnight wish, then forget it. You’re drunk. Go to your bed.’

‘A midnight wish?’ Siskind echoed.

‘Look at your chron, master,’ Worna rumbled, returning to his labours. ‘The Imperial calendar is about to flick over one more meaningless digit. A new year. If you’re partied up, and fancy to settle some old score, sleep on it. I’ll still be here in the morning.’

‘No,’ said Siskind. ‘I know what I’m doing. I want the services of a bounty tracker. I’m prepared to pay.’

‘How much?’ asked Worna.

Siskind glanced at Ornales. ‘Twenty thou. Plus a ten per cent stake of whatever cut we make.’

Lucius Worna dropped a still-twitching hand into one of the icy caskets and closed the lid. He looked at Siskind. ‘You’ve got my attention,’ he growled. ‘What sort of cut are we looking at?’

‘You know, you’re still kind of *bleeding* there...’ Ornales said timidly, indicating his cheek.

‘Yeah,’ Worna replied. ‘You gonna sew me back up, pussy-boy?’

‘N-no, I just—’

‘Then I’ll get to it when I get to it,’ Worna said. ‘What sort of cut?’

‘Six, maybe seven million in the first year.’

‘At ten per cent? That’s a real lot. What’s the job?’

‘I need you to hunt for me.’

‘That’s what I do.’

‘I was meant to meet a body here, here at Bonner’s Reach. A good friend. Name of Thekla.’

‘So go look around.’

‘I have,’ Siskind replied. ‘He’s not here. He told me he would be, at Firetide, but he’s not. If he’d gone out on some trade run, he would’ve left a message here for me on the personal spindles. But he hasn’t.’

‘Why’s it so important?’

‘I know he has enemies.’

‘Yeah?’

Siskind shrugged. ‘I want to employ you, Worna. To find my friend, or find the bastard who killed him before he got here. There’s a lot riding on it.’

‘And who might this bastard be?’ Worna asked.

‘Gideon Ravenor. An Imperial inquisitor. Is that a problem?’

‘Not even slightly,’ said Lucius Worna.



NOW

Local winter time, Eustis Majoris, 403.M41

I HAVE TO admit, after ten months aboard the *Arethusa*, I am filled with an almost unquenchable desire to throttle shipmaster Sholto Unwerth. And I don't have any hands.

I employed Unwerth through my team principals. It was, in fact, Harlon Nayl who arranged the contract and negotiated the terms of Unwerth's service. The price had seemed agreeable at the time, but as it turns out, there were hidden costs, infuriation being chief amongst them. Unwerth is diligent enough, and ineffably eager to please me. It is clear he takes his secret compact to serve the ordos of the Imperial Inquisition very seriously. But he is everywhere, everywhere I turn, underfoot, tormenting me with questions, and butchering the language with such a disregard for —

Well, enough.

It has been a trying time. The trap at Bonner's Reach tested us all, and cost us. I doubt Cynia Preest will ever forgive me for the damage done to her beloved ship and the losses suffered by her crew.

I glide along the third deck companionway of the *Arethusa* towards the small stateroom Unwerth obliged me with. Zael is there, playing some game of his own devising with the pieces of my regicide set. He's just a boy: sallow, shaggy-haired, no more than fourteen. He often tells me he's eighteen, and I know he's lying. I also know he doesn't know what the truth is.

Zael looks up as I whisper in. After all this time, he's still not used to my presence and appearance. I sense his fear. I am... no longer made as other

men are. Grievous injuries, received over sixty years ago on Thracian Primaris, have left me confined to an armoured, enclosing support chair. The chair is dark-matt, sleek, suspended and propelled by a humming field projected by the ever-turning anti-grav hoop. I am just a mind, wrapped in a shred of ruined flesh, locked in a mobile life-support unit. I have no face any more.

‘Ravenor,’ Zael says. For all his wariness, he has never been afraid to call me by my name. No rank, no deference. Behind my back, I know he calls me *The Chair*.

‘Want to play?’ he asks.

I’ve been attempting to teach him the rudiments of regicide. So has Nayl. It is diverting to sit with Zael and push the playing pieces around the board with my mind. But for a bright lad, he’s slow to pick up the knack.

I switch to ‘speech’ via my chair’s mechanical vox-ponder. My words issue flat and monotonous, a quality I despise, but Zael is unsettled by my psi-voice. ‘I have work to do, Zael. Can you find somewhere else to be?’

Zael nods. He gets up. From the flash of his surface thoughts, I understand he’s deciding whether to seek out Nayl and ask him impertinent questions about women, or go and torment Unwerth’s manhound, Fyflank.

Zael’s excited. I pick that up too. We’re going home. To what he thinks of as home, anyway. It’s just a few days away now. We’re going back to the place where all this started, before I went off chasing wild geese. To finish it.

Zael leaves. I shut the hatch with a flick of telekinesis, and slide the bolt. Alone, I turn the chair to face the transcriber unit. Another flick, and it turns on, ready. I start to write, moving the stylus armature with my mind.

To my Lord, Rorken, Grand Master of the Ordos Helicon, salutations. Sir, this missive is a testament—

Too slow and fussy. Too painstaking. I am seized by an urgency to get it all down at last, almost as if time is running out. I extend a mechadendrite

cable from the base of my chair and link it to the transcriber's terminal. Now all I have to do is think the words.

Sir, this missive is a testament, and I am recording it in the event that I will not survive to communicate it to you in person. I have sent this statement in encrypted form via astropath to the ordo office on Gudrun, with explicit instructions that it be delivered to you by a senior ranking interrogator. It has opened and decrypted only because it has registered your bio-template. You are the only one I can trust any more. The heresy I am endeavouring to expose may reach into the upper society of the Angelus subsector itself. To the very top, I fear.

My lord, here are the facts. Corroborating evidence may be found in the encrypted data-curls attached to this report.

In the early part of 401, I took my team to Eustis Majoris, capital world of the Angelus subsector, to investigate the illicit trade in so-called 'flects'. These corrosively addictive objects are flooding the black market throughout the subsector group, smuggled in from the Mergent Worlds rimwards of Angelus. Flects are dangerous things, abominably dangerous. They are splinters of glass from the billion broken windows of the decaying hive ruins out in the Mergent Worlds, swollen with abhuman energies due to their long exposure to the warp. They have soaked up the light of Chaos, marinating for centuries in its glare.

In these little splinters of corrupted glass, a user might glimpse a reflection of something wondrous and be uplifted for a brief time to some transcendent high. When they come down, they immediately crave another glimpse of the wonder, another 'look', as the slang goes. But a great number of flects contain nothing except a fleeting vision of ultimate cosmic horror, a true vision of the warp. Such a sight destroys minds. And, of course, no user ever knows what he or she is about to see until they look into their next flect.

Flects are a curse. A disease. A plague. They are more addictive and destructive than any of the prohibited chemical drugs that blight Imperial culture. Not only do they kill, they corrupt. Every single flect that passes

into the community carries with it the potential to open a gateway to the Ruinous Powers and destroy the Imperium, piecemeal, from within.

Reading this, it may surprise you, my lord, to hear that flects are no longer my primary target. The trade must be stamped out, and the distribution of flects stopped as soon as possible, and if I and my band can assist in that great work, so much the better. But because of the flect trade, I have uncovered something far more insidious.

The flect trade is just the by-product of a greater heresy.

A cartel of rogue traders, operating under the terms of an off-book, black-budget arrangement known as Contract Thirteen, is providing the senior ministries of Eustis Majoris with tech salvage procured in secret from the polluted Mergent Worlds. This trade is in the form of codifiers, cogitators and other calculating engines recovered from the warp-drowned Imperial hives in that doomed territory. Someone, someone very high up in the hierarchy of Eustis Majoris, is paying well for such tainted artefacts. At the time of writing, their motive is not clear to me.

The cartel, risking everything to slip past the battlefleet blockade sanctioning the Mergent Worlds and anxious to maximise their profits, has been smuggling in flects as a supplement to their lucrative trade in logic engines.

Ironic, then. I come to Eustis Majoris to choke the flect trade and the traces of it bring me to greater threat. In their greed, the rogue traders have betrayed their true agenda. Contract Thirteen.

I pursued the matter of the flects to the hilt, until it brought me face to face with agents of the Administratum itself, in the form of one Jader Trice, First Provost of the Ministry of Subsector Trade. He seemed to share my concern about flects, and arranged for several of his agents to accompany my team on a trip to the black market source, up the line into what is known as Lucky Space.

But this was a trap, a trap sprung by Trice's agents and by the rogue traders I was chasing. I commend them for their ingenuity. At Bonner's Reach, they took control of my ship, the Hinterlight, murdered several

members of the crew, and sought to dispose of us into the local star. Taking me down on Eustis would have caused a fuss. If I and my team failed to return from Lucky Space, it might have been years before anyone thought to examine why.

My team and I prevailed. Against the odds. We overcame Trice's agents, and also the rogue trader, the Oktober Country, which was their instrument for our deaths. I will convey a more complete report concerning these actions later, if I have the chance.

In short, my lord, this is the situation. For want of any definite communiqué, our enemies on Eustis Majoris now assume that we are dead. My chartered ship, the Hinterlight, seriously damaged in the battle, is moving at low speed to the Navy yards on Lenk, where I have made arrangements for it to be repaired. Along with my warband, I have procured transit aboard a freelance merchant ship called the Arethusa, which is giving us passage back to Eustis Majoris, via Encage, Fedra, Malinter and Bostol; in other words, by an indirect route away from the Lenk/Flint trade lane.

We intend to re-enter Eustis Majoris clandestinely. Our enemies believe us dead, and I do not intend to disabuse them of that idea. Undercover, anonymous, we will infiltrate the upper levels of the Administry on the capital world and attempt to reveal the corruption there.

Or die trying.

That is why I am writing to you in this way. What we seek to uncover may run high. Jader Trice is second only to the Lord Governor Subsector, Oska Ludolf Barazan, himself. My lord, I may be about to topple the highest from power. The Angelus sub might be plunged into confusion. I beg of you, stand ready. I don't know how far up this goes. For this reason, I am now operating under the terms of Special Condition status.

As far as the galaxy is concerned, I am dead. My warriors are dead. We will play that deceit as far as it goes until it becomes the truth. At that time, may it be far off, the Emperor protects, I trust you will action this missive and mobilise the ordos to finish what I have started.

In the name of Terra!
Your friend and servant,
Gideon Ravenor.

THE SCRATCHING STYLUS creeps to a halt. I instruct the transcriber to encode the document, keying it to a pheromonal sample of Rorken kept in my chair's databanks. Then I retract the mechadendrite and turn away.

There is one thing I have not covered in my report to the grand master. One detail. On our way back down through the edgeworlds of the Angelus sub, we diverted to the waste-world Malinter because of a summons from an old friend. Call him *Thorn*. He warned me of a danger, a danger that had been predicted and foreseen. It might be me, it might be one of my team. But something was going to happen on Eustis that would make the Imperium shake.

I wanted to believe it, but I couldn't see it. *Thorn*, God-Emperor watch him, was not as reliable as he used to be. I feared his judgement was off. I am sound. So are my people. I trust them all with my life.

Maybe he had meant Unwerth.

There is a knocking at my cabin hatch.

'Yes?'

'Master Ravenor, I would be obligated if you might spare a momento or two to circumscribe this star chart I am grandiose to be embouchuring for your diverse perspicacity.'

Unwerth. Throne, let it be Unwerth that *Thorn* warned me about.

Throttling him would be a pleasure.

PART ONE

SMOKE AND MIRRORS



ONE

JAIRUS HAMMERED AS moody as any, when the whet was on him, and the whet was on him now. Blurry souled, knuck-brained, his left hand twitching like a beater-box, he woke from a dream where he had been awake all the time, dreaming of sleep.

Jairus was gut-hollow hungry, and thirsty after the last flect. His eyes were filmy, because they had been open and unblinking all the while he'd been asleep, staring at the pimple-board tiles of his hab's ceiling.

Outside the broken window, the city boomed, boomed as loud as the burning city that had backdropped his waking dream. Snatches of looped triumphal marches from the public tannoys, street-vendor cries, pound music from the sink-level clubs, the drum of rain, bells, the *whit-whup whit-whup* of a Magistratum cruiser going past at full pursuit.

The sounds of down-stack Petropolis.

Craproaches ran up and down inside the panes of his eyes, and Jairus moaned aloud, until he realised the roaches were real and the surface they were running up and down on was the cracked plastek of his hab's casement.

Jairus found his gun under a sweat-wet pillow. A knockoff Hostec 13 long-jaw, twenty in the clip, two in the spout. Reassuring as a mother's love. He aimed it at one of the roaches.

Then he lowered his hand. Waste of a load. Man could get more for the price of a bullet than one bug. Specially when the whet was on him.

Saint, but it was.

He staggered to the wash sink and stared at himself in the mirror over the bowl. The mirror was dent-smashed. He'd done that with his forehead the

night before last, starving for a look to flect him happy, angry with the mirror for being so...

...so nothing. So empty.

Jairus felt like butting it again, but his reflection showed a forehead still crusted with blood from the last time.

He saw himself. A mound of vat-grafted muscle, a face peppered with clan-piercings. A tongue – and he unrolled it now – fitted with its own snapping teeth at the tip.

Beauty boy. Slab-clanner. Moody hammer.

In the cracked room behind his face, Nesha was still unconscious on the mattress. She lay twisted on top of the cover, her naked body dancing with snake tattoos. Two cobryds were twisted over her belly and up around her bosom, the gaping mouths framing her dark nipples. She would be out for hours. But when she woke, she'd want a .look too.

More than want.

Need.

Need, screw you very much sir, *need*.

Going out time. Hunting time. Scoring time. Jairus flexed his arms and saw the gun still in his right paw. Just so.

He grabbed his coat and his big black gamp.

STREET LEVEL, THE city booming still. Burn alarms singing from the street posts as the rain pelted out of the west, showing up like a laser blitz in the sodium glow of the sidewalk lanterns. Vehicles splashing by the bell, the bell again.

The bell. Jairus followed the sound.

At the junction of Rudiment and Pass-on-over, there was a chapel. A select place, reserved for highborn worship. The bell was ringing from the acid-gnawed tower. Grand men in long-tail coats were hurrying along the pavement to attend the service.

Jairus joined them, gamping for one of the fine fellows.

‘My thanks,’ the man said, as they reached the chapel door, and palmed Jairus a coin. Jairus folded his gamp and let the rain trickle off it. Always a useful tool, the gamp. Everyone needs a gamper in Petropolis. Jairus had got his from a ten year-old boy he’d knifed to death in the underpass below Golgotten Walk.

They were closing the chapel doors. Jairus slipped inside, into the dry gloom, and made a hasty observance at the sacristy so he wouldn’t look out of place. Down the aisle, the gentlemen were settling in the front few pews as the cleric took the silk cloth off the triptych of Saint Ferreolus, a patron of automation.

Light sang down in colours through the apse windows. Unnoticed, Jairus shuddered as an aftershock of his last look fluttered through him. He took a seat at the back. He smelled the acid in the rain dripping off his furled gamp as it bit into the marble floor. The gun felt deliriously heavy in the hip pocket of his coat.

The service was beginning. The same old junk. The cleric intoning, and the unison answers echoing back from the congregation. Jairus was back in the embracing shadows. Down the front, the gilded triptych was caught in a jetting beam of white light from the overheads, haloed, almost glorious. The cleric’s hands moved in front of it, making symbols, like pale puppets.

Head down, Jairus looked left. He saw the temple boys waiting behind the dossal, straightening their cassocks and mantles, whispering to each other as they prepared the censer, the magnetum and the plate.

The plate. The offering plate. That was what Jairus was interested in. A congregation like this, rich men from the inner formals... that plate could be a major score. Forget fleets for tonight. This would be a week of looks, plus enough lho and yellodes to cushion the come down afterwards.

He was still twitchy. *Calm, calm*, he told himself.

He blinked. The cleric had just said something that sounded odd. The congregation answered. As Jairus watched, the cleric touched the top of the triptych and it folded in on itself.

The tri-part image it then revealed was worse than anything he'd ever seen, even in his worst looks. He gasped and jumped in his seat. The images, the images, they were so...

...they reminded him of the dream of the burning city.

Jairus realised he had wet himself involuntarily and cried out. Too much noise. The entire congregation, and the cleric himself, was looking back at him.

Just make your exit, just make your exit nice and nothing needs to—

'Hello,' said the man, sitting down beside him in the pew.

'U-hh,' was all Jairus could manage.

'I think you've come in for the wrong service,' the man said gently.

'Uh. I think so.'

The man was lithe and long-limbed, his face lean and refined. His clothes were dark, immaculate. His hands were gloved.

'What's your name?' the man asked. 'My name is Toros Revoke.'

Say nothing, Jairus thought. 'My name is Jairus,' his mouth said anyway.

'How d'ye do, Jairus? You're a clanner, am I right? A... what is it now... a "moody hammer"?''

'Yessum, sir.'

'And you're... how does it go... "witchy for a look"?''

'Yessum, sir, I guess I am,' Why are you answering? Why are you answering him, you knuck?

'Bad luck, old boy,' the man said, and patted Jairus reassuringly on the thigh. Jairus cringed. 'You weren't meant to see any of this. Closed chapel, you see. How did you get in?'

There was something about the man. Something in his eyes or tone that compelled Jairus to answer, even though he didn't want to.

'I... I pretended I was a gamper, sir.'

'Did you? How cunning.'

'Master Revoke?' the cleric called from the front. 'Is there a problem?'

‘Just a poor man who mistook his way into our assembly, father. No need for a fuss. He’ll be going shortly.’

The man looked back at Jairus. His pupils were stale yellow, like burned-out suns. ‘What were you doing here?’ he asked softly.

‘I was just...’ Jairus began.

‘Intending to rob the collection plate,’ the man said, looking away. ‘To afford the price of a look. You were going to hold up this entire body of good people to slake your habit.’

‘Not I, sir, I—’

Somehow, the man had got hold of Jairus’s gun. He held the weapon up.

‘With this.’

‘Sir, I...’ Jairus fought the man’s compelling force. This was madness! He was a slab-ox, vat-built, he ought to be able to crush a wimp like this in a heartbeat. He— He swung around, grabbed the man by his dove-grey lapels and smashed him repeatedly against the pew back until the skull cracked open, red and wet. Then he ran for the chapel door and—

Jairus was still sitting in the pew, unable to move. The man was smiling at him. ‘Interesting idea,’ the man said. ‘Very robust. Very direct. But... *never* going to happen.’

‘Please...’ Jairus mumbled.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ the man said, reaching his free hand into his tailored coat, his other hand toying with the heavy handgun. ‘Here’s one on me.’

He handed Jairus a small parcel wrapped in red tissue paper.

‘Now... get on your way.’

Two rectors unbolted the chapel doors for him. Jairus ran.

HE GOT AS far as the ironwalks above Belphagor Under-sink before the steel teeth of panic finally began to relax their bite. His breathing was ragged and he was twitching all over. He grabbed the handrail for support, leaning over, ignoring the acid-itch on his palms from the recent rain.

The man had been bad enough, but the other thing... the tri-part image revealed when the triptych slid open.

Most Glorious Throne of Terra, what a thing! Of all things holy, that certainly wasn't one of them.

The city sub-levels lay below him, a blizzard of lights in the darkness under the ironwalk. Jairus wanted to calm down, relax his pumping heart.

He took out the parcel the man had given him, unwrapped the red tissue paper and looked at the flect. That would do it.

Except... that man, that soft-spoken man with his stale yellow eyes. How could he trust a man like that who simply gave flects away?

Jairus weighed the lump of glass in his hand, then turned and threw it into the darkness off the ironwalk.

'Shame.'

Jairus turned. The man was sitting on the ironwalk stairs behind him. He looked like he had been there for hours. He was smoking a lho-stick in a long holder which he held pinched between his slim, gloved fingers.

'That would have been quick and clean. There would have been pain, but only very briefly.'

Jairus bunched his fists.

'We now have to move to other options.'

'What are you... what... what...?' Jairus stammered.

'You saw too much. Far too much. And I'm a secretist. I'm paid to ensure there are no loose tongues. And your fine augmented tongue, Jairus... well, it looks loose to me.'

'I shall do this?' inquired a whisper-thin voice. Jairus realised that there was a second presence, standing on the stairs behind the man. So thin, so pale, almost transparent.

'No need, Monicker,' the man said, getting to his feet. 'I feel like some practice.'

The man flicked away his lho-stick, slid the holder into his pocket, and took a step towards Jairus. The half-visible figure behind him remained

motionless.

‘It really could have been quick,’ the man whispered. ‘With the flect, I mean. A happy way to go. It’s not going to be quick now. And it certainly isn’t going to be painless.’

Jairas settled his shoulders low and raised his hands. ‘Let’s see,’ he replied. It was the boldest thing he’d ever said. And it was the last thing he’d ever say.

The man uttered something. A word that wasn’t a word, a sound that wasn’t a sound. A single syllable.

Jairus reeled. He felt as if he’d been smacked in the face with a jackhammer. Blood sprayed from his mashed nose.

‘Is good,’ whispered the half-visible figure.

‘It gets better,’ said the man. He said three more un-words in quick succession, his lips flexing oddly to make and accommodate the sounds. Jairus shuddered as something broke his collar bone, something else shattered his left elbow and something else splintered his right knee.

He fell down. The pain was enormous. Years before, he’d been beaten by a rival clan crew. They’d used panel-hammers. He’d been in the public ward for eight months.

That had nothing on this.

The man stood over Jairus, who clawed at his trouser leg. The man announced some more un-words.

Jairus’s teeth exploded out with the first. All of them. Incisors like cracked porcelain, molars like bone pegs with their bloody roots. His tongue burst. The second un-word detonated his spleen. The third caved in his ribs and collapsed his right lung. The fourth relapsed his colon. Blood was pouring out of him, through every natural exit it could find.

A final un-word. Jairas’s kidneys were quivered to mush.

‘He now is dead?’ the half-visible figure asked.

‘Ought to be,’ said the man. He paused and raised a glove to his face, dabbing a tiny trickle of blood that leaked from his own lower lip.

‘Your technique, it improves,’ his companion noted.

‘Practice makes perfect,’ the man replied.

Jairus was still twitching. The blood draining out of him was streaming through the open mesh of the iron-walk deck.

‘Can’t leave him here,’ the man said. ‘The wound-type is very... singular.’

‘I will not carry him. Not I. He smells, and he is messy.’

The man looked up and called out: ‘Drax?’

A third figure appeared, up at the roadway level. He was tall and slender, hunched about his heavy shoulders. A mane of wispy grey hair framed a face that was curiously shallow and wide, with small piggy eyes and a massive jaw that gave him an underbite.

‘Mister Revoke?’

‘Pick him clean, please.’

The newcomer, Drax, hurried down the stairs to join them. He was wearing a skin-suit of leather jack-armor with a row of buckles down his chest, but his entire right arm and hand were encased in a thick gauntlet of chainmail.

‘Step you back, then, Mister Revoke,’ he said. He took a psyber lure from his belt, unwound the silver cord and began to spin it in slow circles. The lure made a humming murmur.

‘Here they come, the little beauties.’

Jairus coughed blood suddenly and opened his eyes. He stared up at the sky.

The last thing he saw were the sheen birds, hundreds of them, mobbing down out of the dark towards him, metal pinions fluttering. They were the last thing he saw because they went for his eyes first.

The last thing he felt was agony. It lasted for six whole minutes as the sheen birds pecked and stripped the flesh from his bones.



TWO

SO, LATE IN the year 402.M41, we returned to Eustis Majoris to finish the work.

It had been well over twelve months since we had last stood together upon that dark, overpopulated planet, and we returned now incognito. Our enemies believed us to be long dead. So much the better. Secrecy was the only real weapon we had left. From the moment of our return onwards, everything would be secrets and lies, until death rendered all things equal and void.

On the last night of our journey back, I visited my comrades, one by one. It was a courtesy I paid out of respect. I was about to ask a lot from each one of them.

I FOUND HARLON Nayl hunting game on a shelf of evergreen forest below a pearl-white glacier. The air was cold and thin. Will Tallowhand was with him, and they were walking together with their long rifles leaning across their shoulders.

I approached through the long grass, spreading my hands to ruffle the stalks that swished around me. Will saw me first. He turned and smiled at me, then tapped Harlon on the shoulder.

Will Tallowhand had been dead a long while. He called something out to me that I couldn't catch. By the time I'd reached them, he had faded away like smoke.

Harlon Nayl looked me up and down. 'Been a long time since you've done this, Gideon,' he said.

'I know,' I replied.

'Looking good,' he said.

‘Looking whole,’ I answered.

He nodded. He was a big man, tall and corded with muscle. His bullet head was shaved but for a tuft of beard on his chin.

‘Is it that bad?’ he asked.

‘That bad?’

He shrugged. ‘Been a long time, like I said. It must be bad for you to come to me like this. I think I know what you’re here to ask.’

‘Do you now?’

Harlon nodded again. ‘Think I do. You want to know if I want to go on.’

‘And do you?’

‘I always thought I’d be in it for the long haul...’ He looked away as his voice trailed off wistfully. The ghost shapes of prong-horn game were melting into the tree-line.

‘Where is this?’ I asked him.

He shrugged. ‘I forget. Durer, maybe, or Gudrun. Sleep often brings me here. Although last time, the glacier was over there.’

We reached the edge of mountain lake lying like a glass spearhead amongst the evergreens. It was so still and glassy it mirrored the trees, the glacier and the sky.

And there we were too, side by side. Harlon, broad-shouldered, thick-armed, his physique as tough and flexible and well-worn as the leather bodyglove he wore. And me, as I had been at the age of thirty-four, an eternity before. A little shorter than Harlon, rather lighter in build, long black hair tied back from a high cheek-boned face that I’d once seen regularly in other mirrors.

‘What are you in your dreams?’ Harlon asked.

‘Am I like this, do you mean?’

‘Yeah.’

I shook my head. ‘No, not for years now. I dream like I live, confined and yet unlimited, in the darkness. But I thought I’d look like this for a change tonight.’

‘Because it’s that bad? I hope this isn’t a psychological game. You wearing your old face to remind us how we met you and who we first swore allegiance to? Hard to say “no” to someone’s face.’

‘Do you want to say no?’

‘Boss, we’ve been through plenty together. Plenty of bad things. Molotch. That business on Dolsene. Stuff I don’t want to remember. Is this really that much worse?’

I paused. ‘It could be.’

‘What about the others?’

‘I haven’t asked them yet. I’m asking you.’

‘And I’m saying yes. You’re going to the others now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I come?’

I SAID YES. We broke the mirror lake into shards and blurred into a stone cell in a tower on Sameter where Patience Kys was singing a lullaby to her long-lost sisters. Prudence and Providence were snuggled up in their cots, ten years old. Outside, an electrical storm split the night.

‘Who are those men?’ Prudence asked, pointing.

Kys turned sharply. The two silver kineblades pinning her long black hair plucked themselves free and circled towards us in the candlelight.

I brushed them aside carefully. Even in dreams, such weapons can wound.

‘What are you two doing here?’ Kys spat. She was a tall, slender woman in her mid-twenties, agile and quick. Unloosed, her straight black hair framed her pale, high-cheek bones and her fierce green eyes.

‘I’m sorry to intrude, Patience,’ I began.

‘He’s come to ask the question, Kys,’ Harlon Nayl said beside me.

‘Yeah?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘If you want to step off, I’ll understand. Do it now before it’s too late.’

‘You staying?’ Kys asked Nayl.

‘Of course,’ he replied.

‘I’m staying too,’ she told me, fixing me with those terrible green eyes. ‘It’s an honour thing.’

‘Because you want revenge?’ I asked.

‘No, because I’m sworn to you, and this is what we do.’

WE LEFT KYS to finish her song. Carl Thonius was harder to locate. The boundaries of his dreams were thick and clotted, and when we entered them, we found ourselves lost in a forest of clothing racks hung with thousands of beautiful garments.

The air was colder than Nayl’s alpine dream.

‘Carl? Carl?’

At the heart of the forest of hanging clothes, Carl Thonius sat naked in a clearing, surrounded by framed mirrors. He rose as we dragged our way in through the jackets and pantaloons and waistcoats. He put on a robe.

The innermost rings around the clearing were bare metal racks rattling with empty clothes hangers.

‘This is an intrusion,’ he said. Carl Thonius was a very mannered person: slender and spare, elegant, his hair a blond, coiffured fringe. His voice trailed away as he saw the guise I’d come in.

‘He wants to ask you the question,’ Nayl said, grinning at Thonius’s discomfort. ‘You know, *the* question.’

‘The inquisitor knows the answer,’ Carl replied tersely. ‘I am his interrogator. I go where he goes, in the Emperor’s name, worlds without end.’

‘Thank you. But I had to ask, Carl,’ I said.

‘I know you did, sir,’ he answered, pulling his robe tight. ‘Our status is Special Condition?’

‘Yes. When we arrive at Eustis Majoris,’ I said, ‘our first problem will be establishing and maintaining cover identity. False documents won’t get us very far and I’ll be damned if we’re going to lose our only advantage.’

‘We’ll all be damned,’ smiled Carl.

‘Then we need something else. Something clever.’

‘I’ll give it a little thought, sir,’ he said.

TWO PALE, WAN suns were setting over us as we crunched down a stretch of foreshore together. There was a figure ahead of us in the twilight, scooping and searching along the beach.

The shoreline was littered with billions of left hands, each one real and flesh and blood. All the same, each one was impossibly fitted with a chrome bracket at the wrist.

Zeph Mathuin was moving along the shoreline, picking up each hand in turn and trying it against the socket of his left arm. Each this-fitting hand he tossed aside.

Mathuin was a tall, dark-skinned man of enormous physical strength. His black hair was braided in rows. In this, his dream, his eyes weren’t the red-coal augmetic flicker of life. They were soft and brown.

He looked round as we approached, discarding another clenching hand.

‘Shit,’ said Nayl, gazing at the long, wide beach of twitching hands. ‘Zeph’s dreams are so much freakier than mine.’

‘Zeph?’ I called out.

‘I can’t find it. Can’t find it. Can’t.’

‘Zeph,’ I said again.

‘What?’ he barked, turning to glare at me.

‘I wanted to ask—’

‘The answer’s yes,’ he said, and turned back to his sorting along the shoreline of wriggling fingers.

WE FINALLY LOCATED Kara Swole in a dressing room behind a thunderous wooden carnival hall in the backwoods of Bonaventure. Outside, barkers with brass voice-trumpets shouted the odds, and the crowd was roaring. Kara sat before the harshly-lit make-up mirror, her red hair pulled back in a lace strap as she white-powdered her face.

Short, supple, voluptuous, she turned in her camp chair as we came in.

‘Is it time already?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Time to go on?’

‘Yes.’

She came over to me and stroked my arms, tugging at my cuffs.

‘You were such a handsome man, Gideon.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Sometimes I forget... I forget what you looked like, back then. You haven’t come to me this way in a long time.’

‘That’s just what I said,’ said Nayl.

Kara’s face changed. ‘I’m dreaming, aren’t I?’

‘Yes, you are.’

‘We’re starting tomorrow, aren’t we?’

‘Yes.’

‘This is the dream where you come and ask me if I want to go on, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘Even to the death?’

‘Even that.’

‘What about the others?’

‘Patience, Zeph and Carl are all with me,’ I said.

‘Me too,’ said Nayl.

‘Frauka and Zael?’

‘I couldn’t get into Frauka’s dreams if I tried... and I won’t get into the boy’s. It’s just us, the band. I needed to know you were still with me.’

‘Of course!’

‘Kara... Now’s the time, the last time. If you want out, say now.’

‘Are you kidding?’ she said. ‘The show must go on.’

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, ship-time, the *Arethusa* translated back into material space on the edge of the Eustis System. The old freighter had been so often repaired and rebuilt during its lifetime, that all clues to its original class and designation had long since vanished in the patchwork mess of its hull. Unwerth liked to think of it (and, by extension, himself too) as a rogue trader, but it was little more than a tinker ship, scraping a living in cheap trinkets and surplus perishables up and down the trade lanes.

From the translation, we joined the busy in-system route, and finally picked up the services of a pilot boat which led us in through the overcrowded rafts of the high anchor harbours to a vacant dock. Berthing fees were twenty crowns a day, and we reserved the anchorage for a calendar month.

The stained globe of Eustis Majoris revolved slowly beneath us. The orbital harbours were superstructures of brass and steel, resembling in their structure and their glittering lights giant circus calliopes the size of continents, linked together in a loose string. More than ten thousand vessels alone clung at anchor to the scaffold-wharves around us. Some of the ships were private merchantmen, haulers, trade-runners; others vast mass conveyance vessels from the noble chartered companies and the franchised lines. Rows of dull, grey Munitorum freighters suckled against raft-edges. Gold and crimson mission-ships of the Ecclesiarchy, splendid as ceremonial sceptres, dragged at the titanic chains that moored them to private, consecrated docking areas. In the distance, threat-black warships skulked in armoured pens separate from the main harbours. Near-space bustled with traffic: shuttles, service ships, mobile derricks, tankers, lighters, lift ships bound for the surface, taking the traders' merchandise down to the markets of Eustis Majoris's cities.

Apart from cursory identification, pilot ship dues and berthing registration, no one really noticed the *Arethusa*. Just another mangy, nondescript tramp limping in with ice on its pitted hull, trailing skeins of

fuel vapour from where the pressures of the Empyrean had flexed and deformed its fabric.

Carl had come to me early, and described the plan that had evolved in his mind. I valued Carl most for his technical brilliance, but this scheme impressed me as much for its daring and audacity. As an operative, he was maturing.

‘There are risks,’ I said.

‘Of course. But as you said, we need to be able to operate freely without fear of detection. Even the best forged documents will show up as false if subjected to thorough Informium inspection. And we have every reason to believe that the people we’re dealing with will have access to such resources.’

‘So the perfect solution is to get the Informium itself to forge documents for us?’

He smiled. It was the smile he used when he was insufferably pleased with himself. ‘In a manner of speaking.’

‘You’ve planned this operation thoroughly?’

‘In all particulars. Timings, distances, codes. All the minutiae. Sir... I’d like to run the operation personally. I would regard it as an honour if you’d allow that.’

‘I see. Why, Carl?’

He fiddled nervously with a garnet ring on his right pinkie. ‘Three reasons. First, it’s my idea. Second... how can I put this delicately? Physically, you are our weakest link. The rest of us can disguise our appearances, but you do rather stand out. And your form is known to our enemies.’

It was something I’d been thinking about since we’d begun our journey back to Eustis Majoris. Because of the secrecy, I was going to have to rely entirely on my agents during this mission. I could not allow myself to be seen. It was a frustrating prospect. We were here, undertaking an extremely hazardous endeavour, and all because I insisted it should be so.

Yet I was going to have to sit back and watch as they took all the real risks for me.

‘Very well,’ I told him. ‘I’m going to have to get used to being the least visible player in this game. You can run this.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I will be watching, and helping, if I can.’

‘Of course. But there will be no need.’

He got up to leave my cabin. ‘What was the third reason, Carl?’ I asked.

He turned and faced my support chair squarely, as if he were looking me in the eyes. ‘Last year, I fouled up. On Flint, and later, when the ship was taken. I was the weak link then. I want an opportunity to redeem myself.’

WE ASSEMBLED IN the main hold. Nayl had a lifter whining up to power. Kara, Kys and my blunter, Wystan Frauka, were loading the last of the equipment packs into the lifter’s cargo pod. Carl was nearby, talking quietly to the boy, Zael. Carl and I had agreed that Zael could play a part in this initial operation, and the boy was clearly excited by the role Carl was explaining to him.

I still had some doubts about Zael. He was very young and inexperienced, and displayed the beginnings of a potent psychic gift that he as yet did not understand. That rare quality of a mirror psychic, not active but passively reflective. I kept him with me to watch over that growing talent, to nurture it. But he was growing restless being on the sidelines all the time. Giving him a responsibility would boost his confidence and make him feel part of the group.

Mathuin arrived, escorting our prisoner. Feaver Skoh had been a game agent, a player in the Contract Thirteen cartel, and one of the men trying to kill us at Bonner’s Reach the year before. We’d captured him there, and much of what we knew was based upon things he had given up under interrogation. Both Nayl and Thonius believed there was nothing more we could get from him, and considered it a waste of effort keeping him with us. But he was our only resource, and I wasn’t about to give that up yet.

Incarceration and misery had shrunk him down. He was a shadow of the bruiser who had gunned for us in Lucky Space. His sandy blond hair had grown paler and thin, and a straggly beard covered his once jutting chin. He shuffled along in his manacles as Zeph led him to the lander. He was pitiful but, I sensed, not yet broken.

He ignored everyone and said nothing, but he turned and fixed me with one brief stare before Zeph led him up the ramp.

The squat figure of Sholto Unwerth hurried over to me.

‘Are you all in the readiness, sir? Are you concupiscent for the rigours that may prevail?’

‘Yes, Master Unwerth.’

‘And you wish upon me to have myself stay positioned here?’

‘Yes, Master Unwerth. The berthing fees are paid in advance. Remain here with your ship. If we have not returned, or made contact with you by the time the prepayment runs out, you may leave and continue with your own business. With my thanks.’

‘Well, then, I bid you all formaldehyde and gross misadventure. Just the one singularly thing...’

‘Yes?’

‘In all these copious months, you still haven’t pertained to me what your business is.’

‘You’re right, Master Unwerth,’ I said. ‘I haven’t. And I won’t. For the good of your health.’



THREE

ORFEO CULZEAN WAS a rare beast. His papers declared him to be a dealer and purveyor of antiquities, but that merely described the legitimate business he conducted to disguise his real work. It allowed him to travel widely through the sector, and availed him of opportunities to acquire curios and inspect the reserved collections of many museums and archives. His scholarship was highly regarded. He had not a single blemish of criminal activity on his record.

But Orfeo Culzean was a professional malcontent, a mercenary, a shaper of destiny. No warrior he – Culzean had never lifted a finger against another soul personally – his speciality was subtle and invidious. He made things happen. He was an architect of fate, one of the foremost expeditors employed by the Divine Fraternity.

Culzean did not belong to the Fraternity itself. He had no interest in being a seer, and bore no wish to sacrifice an eye or blister his skin. But it was he, and a few rare beasts like him, that the Fraternity turned to when it wished to make its prospects into a reality.

Under normal circumstances, he would have been the most dangerous man alive on Eustis Majoris. But that winter, he was up against stiff opposition.

The Fraternity had summoned him to Eustis Majoris, financed his passage, and paid for an exclusive suite at the Regency Viceroy in Formal C, at the heart of Petropolis. Two days after his arrival, the magus-clancular of the Divine Fraternity cell active in Petropolis came to visit him.

The magus-clancular was called Cornelius Lezzard. He was three hundred and ten years old, infirm and riddled with disease, his crippled body supported in an upright exoskeleton. Two brothers of the Fraternity escorted

him. All three wore simple black suits with velvet hats. All three had moved their purple velvet eye patches to cover their everyday augmetic optics, so as to do Culzean the honour of regarding him with their sacred, real eyes.

What those eyes saw when they entered the opulent suite was a portly man in late middle age, dressed in a high-buttoned suit of blue worsted, his thick, dark hair and beard perfectly groomed. He was sitting in a leather armchair, caressing a little simivulpa that played on his lap. As the fraters came in, he put the pet down and got to his feet. The silky fox-monkey barked and clambered up to perch on the back of the chair.

Culzean bowed slightly.

‘Magus-clancular, a pleasure to meet you again,’ Culzean’s voice was as soft and heavy as comb honey.

‘We look upon you, Orfeo,’ Lezzard replied.

‘Please, repatch yourselves. Let us not stand on ceremony.’

The two escorts replaced their velvet patches over their organic eyes, exposing their crude, glowing augmetics.

One had to help Lezzard, who fumbled at his own patch with palsied hands.

‘It has been a few years since we last worked together on a prospect,’ Lezzard said. His voice had a tremulous, breathless quality. Tubes from his exoskeleton’s bio-support pack were sutured into his scrawny neck.

‘Indeed. On Promody. The plague was a thing of exquisite beauty.’

‘This prospect is many times more wonderful.’

‘I imagined it would be. The summons was... eager. As I understand it, this particular prospect is the Fraternity’s chief current interest.’

‘It is. That is why I asked the Fraternity masters to engage your services. Let me introduce my companions. Arthous and Stefoy, both able seers.’

‘Brothers,’ Culzean nodded. The men were typical of the Fraternity: their faces scarred and twisted from the rigours of cult initiation, their hands

worn and eroded from working the silver mirrors. ‘Will you take refreshment?’

‘A little wine, or secum liquor, perhaps?’ Lezzard said.

Culzean nodded. Nearby stood his watcher, a tall, muscular woman with short blonde hair and an anvil-hard face. She wore a tight khaki bodyglove with a fur trim. Her name was Leyla Slade.

‘Leyla?’

She retreated obediently to call for service.

Lezzard limped around the chamber, the pistons of his exoskeleton wheezing. Culzean had decorated the room with his own ornaments. Lezzard examined a few, chuckling from time to time.

‘Your collection grows, I see,’ he said.

‘People die all the time,’ Culzean replied lightly.

‘Indeed they do. But tell me... this key?’

‘It choked a child on Gudrun.’

‘Did it? And this paving stone?’

‘Once lay at the very top of the processional steps outside the templum at Arnak. The glass vial beside it contains some of the rainwater that made it wet and treacherous to an unsuspecting pilgrim.’

‘Forgive me,’ one of the fraters – Arthous – said, ‘I don’t understand.’

Culzean smiled. ‘I collect deodands,’ he said.

Arthous looked bemused.

‘A deodand,’ Culzean said, ‘is an object that has directly caused the death of a person or persons. This tile, from the roof of an auction house on Durer, which cracked the skull of a passing magistrate. This ink pen, whose filthy nib poisoned the blood of the Administratum cleric who accidentally speared himself in the buttock. This thunderstone, falling like a missile from the open sky onto a herdsman in Migel County. This apple, sealed in a plastek block to preserve it – you notice the single bite mark? The poor woman was allergic to the juice.’

‘Extraordinary,’ said Arthous. ‘May I ask... why?’

‘Why do I collect them? Cherish them? You know what I do, Frater Arthous. I engineer destiny. These objects fascinate me. I believe they contain a vestige of some outer force, some happenstance. Each one crude, and of itself worthless, but empowered. I keep them by me as charms. Every single one has changed a person’s fate. They remind me how fickle and sudden fate can be, how easily twisted.’

‘They’re the source of your power?’ Stefoy wondered.

‘They’re just a collection of things,’ Culzean said. ‘All of them yearn to shape the future as completely and as fully as I do.’

Leyla Slade returned, with a tray of hot secum in drinking kettles. She served the men as they took their seats under the tall windows of the suite. The simivulpa scurried playfully under their chairs. Outside, the rain lashed the grim, high stacks of the city.

‘Tell me about the prospect,’ Culzean said, sipping from his drinking kettle’s spout.

‘How much do you know, Orfeo?’ Lezzard replied.

Culzean shrugged. ‘The Fraternity’s seers on Nova Durma have seen something in their silver mirrors. A prospect that is – and I understand this is almost unheard of – almost one hundred per cent likely. Something will occur here, on Eustis Majoris, before the end of the year. A daemonic manifestation. It will shake history. Its name will be Slyte.’

‘A decent appraisal,’ the magus-clancular replied, as Stefoy helped him suck from his kettle. ‘Arthous, the rest.’

Arthous leaned forward in his seat, and put his kettle down. He stank from the sores on his body, but Orfeo Culzean was too well-mannered to register distaste.

‘The name, expeditor, will indeed be Slyte. Perhaps the name may be Sleet or Slate or—’

‘Slyte will do,’ Culzean said, raising a hand. ‘What I don’t understand is this. I was told of an almost one hundred per cent certainty. Why in the name of darkness do you need my services?’

‘The key word, sir, is *almost*,’ Stefoy said. ‘In the last few months, our brother-seers on Nova Durma have reported a clouding.’

‘A clouding?’

‘The prospect is becoming less certain. As if fate is twisting against it. We need to confirm fate’s path. Make it certain again. Make it true. The prospect was seen to occur between the start of 400 and the end of 403. That time is almost on us now.’

‘I see,’ said Culzean. ‘Now, does this prospect have a focus?’

Arthous reached into his suit pocket and produced a sheaf of crumpled parchments. ‘These are the transcripts made by the seers. The focus is named here, you see. A person called Gideon Ravenor.’

‘Ravenor?’ Culzean said. ‘The writer?’

‘He is an Imperial inquisitor.’

‘Yes, but he writes too. Various essays, treatises. All rather fey and ponderous to my taste, but well thought of. This Ravenor’s the focus?’

‘Him, or one of his close associates,’ Lezzard nodded.

‘Curious,’ Culzean said, taking the parchments and studying them.

‘The Inquisition is already alert to this prospect,’ Stefoy said. ‘They have attempted to thwart us. One agent in particular, Ravenor’s old mentor, the inquisitor Eisenhorn.’

Culzean looked up. ‘Eisenhorn? That old bull? Now he I’ve most certainly heard of. Where is he in this picture?’

‘He attempted to warn Ravenor of the prospect on Malinter last year. We were unable to stop him, though it seems Ravenor himself did not believe the warning. Eisenhorn was later tracked down and slain by our brothers on Fedra.’

‘Glory! You killed Gregor Eisenhorn?’ asked Culzean.

‘We believe so. He was confronted on Fedra, at the Mechanicus temple on Mars Hill. A considerable battle ensued, which ended with the explosive destruction of the entire site. His thread vanished from the seers’ vision thereafter. To a degree of certainty, we are sure he is dead.’

‘To a degree of certainty?’

‘He no longer appears in our scrying mirrors,’ Lezzard said dryly.

‘What about Ravenor? Is he here?’

‘This is where the clouding troubles us. There is contradiction in the seers’ visions. Some say he is dead already. Others say he is here, amongst us, in Petropolis. It is possible he is here under a veil of the utmost secrecy. If so, that might explain the contradiction.’

‘And what are the determiners I can use?’ Culzean asked.

With Stefoy’s help, the master-clancular produced more crinkled papers. ‘These are the determiners we have established. Nineteen names; persons who, we have predicted, will manifestly influence the outcome of the prospect.’

‘Some of these people are... highly placed,’ Culzean said, reading.

‘Indeed.’

‘And Ravenor himself is on the list.’

‘Yes. At this time,’ Lezzard said. ‘We don’t know why.’

Culzean looked up at Leyla Slade. ‘I’ll need a psyker, immediately. Non-aligned, black market. Find out if Saul Keener is still operating on Eustis Majoris. He does good work.’

‘At once,’ she replied.

‘Can you help us?’ Stefoy asked. ‘Can you expedite this?’

‘I believe so,’ Culzean said, rising to his feet. The simivulpa ran up his sleeve and sat on his shoulder. Culzean was still studying the papers. ‘We need to be quick and ruthless. We can’t worry about these determiners. They are all fungible elements. We have to clear the field and hone the prospect down to a bare, simple fact.’

‘You mean we have to kill them?’ Arthous said.

‘Probably. It’s like surgery. We have to excise the muddle. I think we should start with him.’

Culzean showed Lezzard the page.

‘The Fraternity couldn’t begin to attempt a killing like th—’

‘That’s what you pay me for. I’ve brought devices with me.’

‘Devices?’ mumbled Stefoy.

‘Shining weapons of destiny,’ Culzean said with a smile. ‘I believe we should wake the incunabula.’

‘Really? Are you sure, sir?’ Leyla Slade asked.

Culzean nodded energetically. He was hitting his stride now, in command, in control. ‘The Brass Thief is very malleable, very adaptive. Yes, I’m sure. We’ll wake him up.’

‘It,’ corrected Leyla Slade.

‘You don’t know him like I do,’ Culzean grinned. He turned to the fraters. ‘We’ll begin in a day or so. Where are you based, master?’

‘The occulting lighthouse at the bay end of Formal Q,’ Lezzard replied.

‘Remote, is it? Discreet?’

‘Yes, Orfeo.’

‘I’ll come to you there. We’ll wake the incunabula and begin our work.’

‘What is this thing you speak of?’ asked Stefoy.

‘Just a tool. A deodand.’

‘Like a roof tile or a pen?’

Culzean shrugged. ‘Slightly more proactive than that. There will be a cost involved.’

‘The Fraternity’s funds are at your disposal for this, Orfeo,’ Lezzard replied.

Orfeo Culzean raised a fist and coughed politely into the core of it. Leyla Slade took a step forward. ‘Magus-clancular, sir, my employer did not mean a monetary cost. You must arrange for there to be persons present whose lives can be used as payment.’

‘Sacrifices?’ asked Lezzard.

‘At least a dozen,’ said Orfeo Culzean. ‘The Brass Thief gets his name because he steals lives. And when he wakes, he will be so awfully hungry.’



FOUR

‘HEY, I’VE AN idea. Try opening it,’ Nayl suggested.

‘Try *waiting* for me to open it,’ Kara growled back, fumbling with the power driver. It whined pathetically in the gloom, and she coughed as rust flecks billowed down. ‘Damn thing’s corroded shut. Just use your cutter. This is wasting time.’

Nayl lit the torch blade of his las-cutter. The fizzling glow lent their surroundings an even greater sense of decay and neglect.

Kara jumped down from the crusted metal rungs. She made an ‘after you’ bow – difficult to do in a bodysuit so laden down with kit.

Nayl clambered up the ladder, and dug the cutter into the rim of the heavy roof hatch. Metal curled away, glowing, melting, dripping onto the floor below in fat, orange droplets.

The vox pipped. ‘Are you two quite ready yet?’ Carl said. ‘This plan relies on perfect co-ordination. I explained that, didn’t I?’

‘Yes, Carl. You did,’ Kara replied. ‘Little technical difficulty with the roof access.’

‘I blame the acid rain,’ Nayl said, still at work.

‘So noted,’ Carl’s voice cracked over the line.

‘I blame Nayl,’ said Kara. ‘It makes me feel better about myself.’

‘Also noted. I applaud the sentiment.’

‘We’re through,’ Nayl called, killing the cutter blade and slipping it back into his hip pouch. ‘Mask up and brace yourself.’

Kara checked her hood seals and pulled the breather mask down over her face.

Nayl punched the ancient metal hatch and it flopped over, open onto the exterior roof. Immediately, a pressure wave of wind and rain burst down

onto them. It was even worse than she'd expected, howling, murderously violent. The acid-warning lights inside their headsets lit up. A stormy night in downtown Petropolis.

The high, flat roof of the Mansoor Hagen Manufactory was just a jumble of duct heads and old reheater blocks in the darkness. The roaring crosswind drove the acid rain in slantwise sheets across the mouldering roof and threatened to tear them off their footing.

They staggered on, heads low, two strange, bulky shapes in the dark, moving east. Up ahead, through the fuming rain, the lights of the city glowed, one in particular.

The Mansoor Hagen Manufactory in Formal H had once, proudly, been the subsector's chief producer of buttons and other quality clothing fasteners. Twenty years before, it had ceased production and closed down; maybe there had been a new trend in button recycling, maybe the citizens of the Angelus Subsector had begun to care less if they were decently fastened up. Whatever, the place had died, and the site had been sealed by the guild foremen.

The manufactory itself was a massive ouslite blockhouse a kilometre long and half a kilometre wide, rising nearly four hundred metres above the top of the upper stack levels. It lay across eight sink blocks, arranged roughly east-west along its longest sides. The western end looked out to Formal F and the sprawl of factory residuals. The eastern end faced the vast donjon of the Informium Depository on the boundary of Formal D.

Nayl and Kara reached the east-end lip of the massive building. They had to cling on to the old support wires to prevent themselves being torn off the roof by the wind.

'Decent take-up,' Nayl noted, his voice tinny over the vox.

'There's a kindness. Check the direction.'

Nayl fumbled with the instrument strapped to his left wrist.

'Blowing due east. Eight over seven. It's going to be a quick trip.'

Kara did some quick mental maths. 'Really quick,' she replied. 'No more than eighteen, nineteen seconds. We'll have to be really sharp not to

overshoot. Shave off another two seconds to compensate for the way the wind's going to carry us even when we're uncoupled.'

'Two?'

'Yes, two! Trust me! Now, are you set?'

Nayl played out the carry-tube from his belt and the wind immediately tugged at the limp sack like a flag. He kept one hand clenched to the guard wire, and took hold of the inflator pump with the other.

'Set!'

Kara had done the same with her own kit.

'We're set,' she voxed to Carl.

'Then I'll start making my way in. Thonius out.'

'Ready?' Kara asked Nayl.

'For this? No,' he said. 'But let's do it anyway.'

They both activated the pressurised helium canisters fixed to their belts. In less than a second, the two limp sacks trailing wildly in the wind at the end of their carry-tubes had expanded into taut globes a full metre in diameter. The wind grabbed them at once.

Kara and Nayl let go of the wires and the windshear, wrestling with their globe balloons, yanked them forward with brutal force, off the edge of the manufactory, into the open sky.

CARL THONIUS HURRIED across the rainswept street, past the singing burn alarms, and reached the north portico of the Informium Depository. Under the awning, he paid off his gamper, tipping the boy well. The gamper took the coin with a smile, shook off the huge, acid-resistant folds of his gamp, and went in search of other business.

Thonius brushed down his blue merskin jacket, flushed out his lace cuffs, and straightened his cravat. He took a moment to check his reflection in one of the deep windows of the entranceway.

'Sublime,' he murmured.

Tucking his document case under his arm, Thonius clipped up the wide steps and entered the towering north atrium. It was dreadfully warm inside, almost tropical. Well-armed Magistratum guards lingered on the vast marble floorway, and beyond them stood the ornate silver podiums of the public interlocutors. At this late hour, only a few citizens bustled to and fro, most of them lawyers or legal assistants chasing down last minute details before the courts opened the following morning.

‘May I be of service, sir?’ asked a uniformed docent.

‘I don’t know,’ Thonius smiled back. ‘May you?’

The docent produced a datawand from under his mantle and flipped it on. A hololithic list of headings and sub headings projected up into the air from the wand’s tip. ‘Do you require births? Deaths? Marriages? Lineage? Augment or cloning records? Land rights? Settlements? Copyright manifests? Historical and/or analytical claims? Tithe records? Buskage? Tullage? Vellement? Remallage? Gubernatorial records—’

‘Do you have frottage?’

‘Uh, I don’t believe so, sir.’

‘Pity. I’ll tell you what. What it is, you see, is that I’m actually a student of High Imperial architecture: modern, intuitive, post-modern, quasi-modern, whatever. I’m on sabbatical here on this lovely... and I do mean very, very lovely... world of yours, and I was told to look this place up. Lingstrom, they said, for that is my name, Lingstrom, you really must behold the Informium in Petropolis before you die.’

‘Are you dying?’ the docent mumbled, wide-eyed.

‘My dear soul, we’re all dying. Each in our own way. I intend my parting to be extravagantly consumptive and melancholic, yet a touch romantic. How about you? By the look of you, I’d say the best you could hope for is a bad step on a wet stairwell. Or maybe a ram shellfish supper. Alone, no doubt.’

‘S-sir?’

Thonius spread his arms wide and looked up at the vast, frescoed ceiling of the atrium two hundred metres above their heads. ‘Just look at it. No,

look! Really look!’

The docent looked up, and blinked, as if he had never seen the magnificence before.

‘Splendid, isn’t it?’ Thonius said.

‘I... I suppose so, sir,’ the docent replied.

‘I’m in the front door,’ Thonius whispered into his concealed vox-mic. ‘Get our little friend in position, Patience.’

‘YOU KNOW WHAT to do?’ Patience Kys asked.

‘I think so,’ Zael replied. She was shooing him along under the walkway canopy towards the Informium’s west entrance. Acid rain beat on the tight covers above them. Zael was fidgeting with his right hand.

‘Leave it alone.’

‘It itches really bad,’ he complained.

‘Wait a minute,’ Kys said, stopping suddenly. ‘Let me check... No, I don’t care. Get on and don’t mess this up.’

‘Stop ragging me. I’ll do this.’

‘You’d better,’ Kys warned. She fixed the boy with her hard green eyes. ‘One hair out of place and I’ll debone you faster than you can say, *Oh, Mr Ravenor, bweh bweh bweh...*’ Kys mock-sobbed, her knuckles up at her eyes and pulled a stricken face, her lower lip stuck out.

Zael laughed.

She slapped him round the chops.

‘What the hell was that for?’ Zael asked, his eyes reddening with tears.

‘Just getting you into character. Come on.’

She grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him at a run into the quiet of the west entrance. This was a minor public entrance, just a couple of interlocutor podiums staffed by clerks and a handful of guards.

Kys pulled Zael up to one of the desks and yanked him to attention. From his high silver podium, the clerk peered down. He adjusted his augmetic implants to focus properly.

‘What is your business?’ he asked.

‘I need this one gene-screened,’ Kys said, indicating Zael.

‘And you are?’

‘Subsist officer, Formal E department,’ Kys flashed a leather identity wallet open and shut perfunctorily, just too fast for it actually to be seen. She was wearing a sober, well-tailored grey suit, her hair in a tight coil, and no make-up. Her blunt demeanour and austere look was precisely that of a humourless social welfare agent. ‘Found this one sleeping rough. Thieving too. We need a screen to establish next of kin and get him assigned.’

The clerk looked at Zael. The boy’s clothes were worn and frayed, and his face was sullen.

‘Very well,’ The clerk selected some coloured forms from his desk and passed them to her through the grille. ‘Fill these out. There’s a booth over there. Then bring him back for scanning. The fee will be two crowns.’

‘Thank you,’ Kys replied. She tucked the forms under her arm and led Zael over to the writing booths.

‘We’re inside, Carl. Just say the word,’ she whispered.

BELOW THEM, THE city whipped by, dark and dotted with lights. The hindwind was fierce. Kara feared for a moment that it would lift their globes right up into the stratosphere.

The vast, illuminated shape of the Informium was coming up. A gigantic rotunda of basalt, its exterior dressed in ashlar and swathed with climbing ivy and tether-weed around its upper levels. It was one of the largest single buildings in the inner Formals, and the depository of all civic documents and records for Eustis Majoris.

‘Fourteen seconds!’ Kara voxed. ‘Fifteen. Sixteen. Release!’

Kara hit her harness lock. Let go, her globe shot up at once and was lost in the high altitudes of the storm. She dropped like a rock. There was no time to look around for Nayl. Blackness turned over and under her. The city lights whirled dizzily.

Then the upper parapets of the rotunda were rushing up at her. Kara coiled, and landed with a winding impact on a fringe of stone roofway thick with bushy tetherweed and ivy. The plant growth helped cushion her landing. She rolled hard to rob her body of momentum. Sheen birds, startled by her landing, flocked up into the sky.

Battered by the wind and streaming rain, she got to her feet.

‘Kara?’ the vox crackled.

‘Harlon?’

‘Teensy problem.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Somewhere I’d rather not be.’

She scrambled to the edge of the stone roof, struggling through the acid-bleached ivy and stiff weed. She peered down. The sheer drop was giddy. The street was a necklace of lights a kilometre below.

Ten metres beneath her, Nayl was hanging over the drop, clinging to the beard of ivy that cascaded down the outer wall.

‘You stupid ninker,’ she said.

‘Thanks for that. Uh, help?’

Kara quickly unwound the mono-filament line wrapped around her waist. From below, over the vox, she heard Nayl curse. The bushy vines were weak and sickly from years of acid rain, and they were beginning to tear and snap under his weight.

‘Kara?’ Carl voxed. ‘Is everything all right? Are you in position?’

‘We’re fine. Everything’s fine,’ she heard Nayl vox back. ‘We’ll call you back as soon as we’re in place.’

‘Okay, Thonius out.’

‘Why did you tell him that?’ Kara called down.

‘I don’t want to mess up his frigging plan, do I? I don’t want to let him down. He’s trying to prove something to the boss with this operation.’

‘Harlon, you don’t even like Carl. You’ve never liked him. You—’

‘Kara. Baby. Quit it with the mouth and help me, for Throne’s sake.’

‘Okay. Don’t move. Don’t even breathe.’

STANDING IN THE booth, Kys mimed writing with the pen. She’d finished filling out the forms minutes earlier. Now she was just playing for time. She sent a nudge.

+Carl? We’re waiting.+

‘Keep doing just that. Kara and Nayl are not quite in place.’

+Is there a problem, lady?+

Kys stiffened. The telepathic voice wasn’t Ravenor, it wasn’t any mind-voice she knew. It had come from right beside her.

+Zael? Was that you?+

+Yeah. It was me.+

+I didn’t know you could cast. Since when could you cast?+

+I dunno. I just thought out loud and there you were.+

Kys looked at him. After all these months, she still didn’t know what to make of the kid. There was something about Zael that worried her, scared her even.

And it took quite a lot to scare Patience Kys.

WYSTAN FRAUKA LOOKED up from his data-slate. It was yet another of the tediously bad erotic novels he wiled away his time reading, though he never seemed to derive any titillation from them at all. He took the lho-stick out of his mouth, exhaled, and said, ‘What’s the matter?’

‘What do you mean?’ I replied, using my chair’s voice transponder.

‘Something’s the matter. I can tell.’

‘Really? How?’ I asked.

‘It’s the way you always...’ his voice trailed off and he shook his head sadly. ‘You’re a floating box. I don’t have the first clue. I was trying to be personable. Remember how you said I should improve my people skills?’

‘I remember,’ I said. ‘Here’s a tip. Referring to me as a “floating box” is not all that personable.’

‘Right ho,’ he said.

‘However, there is a problem,’ I admitted. ‘Carl’s in place, so are Kys and Zael. But Kara and Nayl are experiencing difficulties.’

‘So intervene. Help them,’ Wystan said.

‘Carl’s so anxious to run this show and make it work. He wants to prove himself to me. If I intervene, it’ll dent his confidence. It’ll look like I don’t trust his abilities.’

‘So?’

‘So I’m supposed to be training him. Making an inquisitor out of him.’

‘If he screws up, he screws up this entire operation, right? I thought you told me it was important.’

+It is important?+

Wystan stubbed out his lho-stick and immediately lit another. ‘Hello?’

Sometimes I forgot that Frauka was deaf to my mind.

‘It is important. Very important. I’m impressed, Wystan, I didn’t think you were even listening at the briefing.’

‘You wound me, inquisitor. I listen. Quite often, actually. I just don’t care much.’

We were holed up together in an empty hab on the sixtieth floor of a stack two kilometres from the Informium. The place was a dank wreck, rain pelting hard against the smeary window. Wystan was sprawled on a sofa that looked as if it had been used as a practice target on an artillery range and then given to hungry rats. He was my untouchable, my psychic blank, the real outsider of my team. Most of the time there was very little for him to do, and he sat around with his limiter activated, smoking and speed-reading his dreary pornography.

I cast my psi wide, and summoned a picture of Kara on the roof of the Informium, Nayl hanging from the slowly tearing vines below her.

‘You said they were experiencing difficulties,’ Frauka said.

‘Yes.’

‘What sort of difficulties?’ he asked. ‘The falling off a tall building to certain death hundreds of metres below kind,’ I said. ‘Bummer,’ he remarked casually.

‘ANY TIME YOU like,’ Nayl murmured. The vines were really starting to give way now.

Kara played out the filament line down to Nayl.

‘Grab it and hook it up!’

He got hold of the end, swaying out as he did so on the bending boughs. Frantically, he cinched the carabine to his belt.

She tightened the line and braced her body against the stonework.

‘I’m having a sodding ball, you know,’ Nayl mumbled.

‘Try and stay rigid. I’m going to lift you now.’

‘Rigid. Not a problem.’

‘Here we go.’

It took thirty seconds. Thirty seconds of effort that almost broke Kara’s back. Nayl dragged himself up over the lip of the roof.

‘Ahem? Are you there yet?’ Thonius voxed.

‘Two minutes more, Carl. That’s a promise,’ Kara replied.

Kara got Harlon to his feet and together they hurried up the slope of the donjon’s domed metal roof towards the branching radiator vanes that rose like a metal forest from the summit of the dome.

Most of the data storage in the Petropolis Informium was beneath the ground in colossal vaults, or housed in crypts in the building’s massive outer walls. The sheer quantity of cogitator activity in the donjon was so great that it generated a staggering amount of bleed heat. Superconductor nets, laced throughout the Informium’s superstructure, channelled the heat waste away to prevent the files from corrupting or combusting, and it was vented into the central flues of the building and out through the roof vanes.

Harlon and Kara hurried in amongst the acid-gnawed trees of the radiator array. Despite the screaming winds and heavy rain, they were both

sweating profusely in their sealed suits thanks to the exertion.

They began powerdriving open the inspection plates of the radiator vane, one by one, and packed each thermostat with insulation felt. In short order, six of the vanes were packed and resealed.

‘Carl... We’re in place and the vanes are lagged,’ Kara voxed. ‘You’re good to go.’

‘THEY TELL ME the internal vaulting is really worth a look,’ Thonius said. ‘They say, Lingstrom, they say, for that is my name... did I mention that?’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the docent. His mind was still a little punchy from the essay the visitor had delivered on ouslite dressing and the miracles of ornamentation the Informium’s original architect had managed, despite a lifelong battle with scrofula and ‘a testicular asymmetry’.

‘Well, I should so love to see the internal vaulting.’

‘The building’s about to close to the public,’ the docent said. ‘In just a few minutes, in fact.’

‘That’s all I’d need,’ Thonius said. ‘Just a peek, you understand.’

‘Very well,’ the docent replied. He led Thonius across the marble floor to the silver podiums of the public interlocutors.

‘What is your business?’ asked the nearest.

‘A visitor expressing interest in the architecture,’ the docent explained. ‘A very knowledgeable man. He’d like to see the internal vaulting. He understands that public access will finish in a short while.’

‘Very well,’ said the clerk.

‘Thank you, dear sir!’ said Thonius, bowing.

The silver podium chattered quietly and issued a yellow pass ribbon from a slot in its side. The docent took it and pinned it to Thonius’s lapel. ‘Visitors’ permit,’ he explained. ‘Public areas only.’

Carl smiled. The docent wore a pass ribbon of his own, but his was scarlet instead of pale yellow.

They passed between the podiums, pausing to let the optic scanners read their permits. Then the docent led Carl through the broad archways onto the wide marble terrace that ringed the ground floor of the inner rotunda. The cavernous vaulted roof rose above them, a kilometre high.

‘Oh, now that is quite magical!’ Thonius cried.

‘I’d like my diversion *now*, please,’ he whispered into his vox.

KYS GRABBED ZAEL by the wrist.

+We’re on.+

She led him back to the interlocuter’s podium and handed over the forms, along with the payment.

The clerk painstakingly read and stamped each form in turn. ‘All in order,’ he said. He wound on a brass handle.

Part of the silver podium’s front slid open to lever out an articulated glass palm reader.

‘Place his hand on the plate, mamzel.’

‘Do it,’ Kys instructed the boy. Zael did as he was told.

There was a pause. A light on the podium flashed diffidently. ‘Now that can’t be right...’ the clerk began.

Klaxons started to howl on full alert. Screamer alarms started to shrill. There was a hollow series of clangs as security hatches slammed closed around the Informium, sealing every exit shut with portcullis cages of electrified bars. The guards looked at each other, raised their weapons, and hurried forward. ‘One diversion, as ordered,’ whispered Patience Kys.

‘WHAT IN THE name of Terra is that awful ruckus?’ Thonius cried.

The docent turned, unnerved at the screaming alarms. Guards and other staff members were hurrying back to the podiums behind them. The outer doors of the building had auto-caged.

‘A security breach!’ the docent said. ‘You’ll have to come with me. Back into the atrium. We’ll need to do a head count and permit check.’

Thonius grabbed him, fearfully. ‘Are we in danger, my friend? I can’t abide danger!’

The docent gently undid Thonius’s grip and ushered him on. ‘You’re perfectly safe, sir. Just head for the exit over there and join the other visitors assembling in the atrium. The guards will tick you off the list. I can assure you, you’re perfectly safe. The guards are very professional, and this kind of thing hardly ever happens.’

Thonius blinked at the young man. ‘You’re not going to leave me, are you?’ he said.

‘You’ll be perfectly safe, sir,’ the docent assured him. ‘Just go to the exit over there and wait. I have to check in at the staff muster point and await instructions.’

‘But—’

‘Really, sir, there’s nothing to worry about. That exit there.’

‘Bless you,’ said Thonius, and began to walk in the direction the docent had pointed. Ahead, a guard was waving visitors out through a barrier gate into the atrium.

The docent hurried off in the opposite direction.

As soon as the docent was out of sight, Thonius changed course and turned back into the main body of the building. He passed a security point, and let the optic scanners read his permit ribbon. A permit that was now scarlet.

‘NOW LET’S BE nice and calm about this,’ the lead guard said, though he kept his weapon raised. Zael was doing a fine job of cowering in terror between Kys’s legs. Kys was staring at the guards in disbelief.

‘What is this?’ she stammered. ‘What the Throne is this?’

The guard looked up at the clerk as his comrades closed in on the woman and child. ‘What’s going on?’ the guard asked.

‘The reader’s posted an extreme crime link,’ the clerk said, as if he didn’t believe it himself. ‘It’s sealed the building, and sent an automatic response

to the Magistratum headquarters. Units are en route. We have to secure the premises and... and detain the malefactor.'

'The what?' asked the guard. 'Him?'

He looked at the teenager crouched beside Kys. The other guards had all aimed their weapons at Zael.

'Him? That's ridiculous!'

Up on his podium, the clerk shrugged. 'I just do what the system tells me. He's a malefactor. Wanted on seven worlds. High profile, max security case.'

'You're bullshitting me!' the guard cried.

'This is outrageous!' Kys cried indignantly. 'He's just a subsist child—'

'Calm down, ma'am,' the guard said. 'There has to be some mistake here. You men! Shoulder your weapons, you look like idiots.'

Reluctantly, the other guards raised their aim and hit the safeties on their firearms.

'This has to be a glitch. Just a glitch,' the guard was saying. 'What does the system say?'

The clerk peered at his screen. 'Palm scan identified as Rinkel, Francis Kelman. Eight counts of rape-murder, five counts of wounding, three counts of public affray.'

'Him? That kid?'

'It's what it says. The system is never wrong,' the clerk said.

'He's just a kid!'

The clerk shrugged.

'How old does the system say this Rinkel is meant to be?' asked the guard.

The clerk consulted his display. 'Sixty-eight.'

'Sixty-eight?'

'He's had work done—'

'My ass he has!'

'Juvenat drugs?' suggested one of the other guards.

‘He’s just a kid!’ the lead guard repeated.

There was a long pause. The clerk shrugged again. ‘You’re right. It’s a mistake.’

The lead guard nodded. ‘Thank you.’

‘Let’s scan him again and sort this out,’ the clerk added.

‘Right,’ the guard said. He turned to Kys and the boy. ‘Come on, son. We have to read your hand again to sort this out.’

‘No! I won’t! I saw what happened last time!’ Zael’s voice came out from behind Kys’s legs.

‘Be a good boy now,’ Kys said. ‘This nice man is trying to help you.’

Zael had already peeled the moulded plastek glove off his hand, removing the fake hand print. He had tucked the peel into Kys’s trouser pocket.

‘Come on, kid. Up you come. We can sort this out nice and simple,’ said the guard, holding out an armoured hand.

‘VANES ARE COOKING off nicely now,’ Kara voxed. ‘Overheat in two minutes,’ ‘Excellent,’ Carl responded.

ZAEL PLACED HIS hand on the reader plate.

There was a pause as the system considered the findings.

‘Hoffman, Arap Behj,’ said the clerk. ‘Fourteen years old, registered to the scholam in Formal H.’

The alarms suddenly cut off. The silence was shocking. ‘System re-enabled,’ the clerk said. There was a series of whines as the security gates and cages began to retract into their wall slots.

‘I told you it was a mistake,’ the guard said.

CARL THONIUS HEARD the alarms shut down. ‘Well,’ he whispered. ‘I do love it when a plan comes together.’

He had run down a wide flight of steps into the deserted inner rotunda, and along a hallway to the arch doorway of one of the Informium’s seven thousand clericulums. It was empty. The clerks had evacuated at the sound

of the alarm. The rows of abandoned cogitator desks winked and flashed. The optic scanners at the doorway simply accepted his permit as he went inside.

He sat down at the first desk. The system was still running, open. In their hurry to evacuate, as Carl had predicted, none of the clerks had shut down their cogitators. No user codes to break, no passkeys.

Carl punched up some data gates, and the screen showed entry to the main banks. Then he opened his document case and took out the compact codifier concealed inside. Carl connected it to the desk's out-ports, and the little machine began to murmur and sigh.

Carl cracked his knuckles and prepared to type. 'Any minute now...' he said.

Simultaneously, red warning lights lit up on every desk. A box appeared on the valve screens announcing a system overheat. The sabotage Kara and Nayl had performed on the rooftop radiator vanes was finally registering.

The Informium's vast data system was programmed to hibernate if an overheat was experienced. It was automatic. The databases shut themselves down, and subsystems also disengaged, to try and compensate for the problem. The first routines to close off were the activity records. Which meant that any operation conducted during hibernation would not be logged. When the system came back up, there would be no trace at all of any tampering or adjustment.

Carl delicately loaded the graft program from his codifier. It sank into the Informium's oceanic mass of data and vanished. Literally without trace.

But it would stay there, and through it, Carl would be able to access any material he needed.

'We're done,' he voxed. 'Extract yourselves.'

'THANK YOU. SORRY for your trouble,' Kys told the guards as she led Zael away across the entry and out into the night. They nodded goodbye.

The rain had eased a little. Zael was stripping off the second plastek palm, the one he'd worn under the first.

A transport pulled out of a side street opposite and drew up at the kerb. The cabin door popped open. At the wheel, Zeph Mathuin nodded to them. 'Good job, kid,' he said. 'Get in.'

KARA AND NAYL slithered down the metal roof. They had removed the insulation felts so the vanes could resume their normal function.

'Wanna try batting out?' Nayl voxed.

'Not in this wind. We'll go over the wall on the fasteners.'

Nayl pulled out the climb anchors and fixed them to the inside lip of the roof balustrade. He handed a line to Kara.

'One sec,' she said. 'Carl? We're about to drop the east facade on fast gear. What's the situation? Everyone out?'

'Just me inside still, and I'll be out in a sec. Off you go—' 'Understood.'

Kara turned to Nayl. 'Let's drop,' she said.

They took their lines in their hands, double-tugged to make sure the anchors were locked, and walked backwards over the lip of the wall. Then they kicked free.

As they fell down the wet stone face of the Informium, the miniature winding gears took up and carefully moderated their plunge.

THE ALARM WAS over. The guards in the north portico of the Informium were thanking the visitors for their compliance and sending them on their way.

'Every one's accounted for,' one of the guards called to the chief clerk.

'All the visitors?'

'All of them, every one.'

'Good job,' the clerk replied. 'I'm scanning only one anomaly. Docent Wiggat did not check in or out during the lock down.'

'Where's Wiggat?' the guard yelled out, his voice echoing across the marble space.

'Here, sir! Right here!' the docent cried, running forward.

‘System says you didn’t check in or out,’ the guard said.

‘But I did, sir,’ the docent replied. ‘As soon as the alarms went off, I went through the barrier to my assembly point.’

‘With that?’ the guard said, pointing.

The docent looked down. The ribbon pinned to his robe-front was pale yellow.

‘Oh crap!’ the docent said.

‘Lock down! Lock down!’ the guard yelled out, turning. ‘We have an intruder!’

The alarms began to bay again. The cages came down.

The Informium depository, for the second time in the same night, locked up tight.



FIVE

CARL THONIUS HEARD the alarms shrilling. He sat up straight. ‘Oh, no,’ he whispered to himself. ‘No, no, no, no...’ He began to unclip the codifier from the desk ports and put it away.

+Carl?+

‘Everything’s fine. It’s fine.’

+It’s not. This isn’t part of the plan.+

‘These things happen. I can deal with it.’

+The building’s on lock-down. You need help.+

‘No!’ he snapped. ‘Honestly, sir. I’m on this. I can handle it.’ Carl closed the document case and realised his right hand was shaking. The tremors were intense, and he could only stifle them by grabbing his right hand with his left.

+Carl?+

‘I can do this!’

Carl got up. Then he punched himself in the mouth. It was easier than he’d imagined. His right arm hadn’t seemed like part of him since Flint. It was like someone else hitting him. It wasn’t shaking any more.

He took off his permit and tossed it into the waste-basket. Then he went out into the corridor, purposefully dribbling the blood from his split lips down his front.

Three guards ran up.

‘That way! He went that way! He hit me!’ Carl cried.

‘Get into cover, sir!’ the guard leader yelled, and they ran on.

I HAD A good remote view of Carl Thonius now. He was heading back towards the north entry. I could feel how much he wanted to do this, how

much he wanted to prove himself. But his plan had just gone up in smoke. I didn't blame him. The unexpected came with the job.

+Carl. Stop it. Your plan's broken. You need my help.+

'I can do this!' he repeated.

+No. You can't. You've done a great job tonight, but I'm taking charge now. Do exactly what I tell you.+

The original version of the plan would have seen Carl sneak out the way he'd got in, but the cover had been blown on his stolen permit. Now we had to go with my version, the worst case version.

All right, not the worst case version. That involved Zeph and his rotator cannon. All the same, Carl was very unhappy as I told him what I wanted him to do.

'I don't like this,' he whispered.

+Neither do I. It'll be a strain. Keep walking.+

The atrium was seething with security officers. The moment Carl passed the optic scanners at the gate, he'd be detected.

+Wait.+

A few guards passed through the barrier and began to spread out into the building, joining the search. We let a couple go by, Carl huddled back in a doorway, until one came along that was roughly his build and height.

+This one.+

Carl came out of cover behind the man, and felled him with a neat folded talon punch to the back of the neck.

+I could have done that.+

'Well, it wasn't beyond me.'

+But you bruise like a ploin.+

Carl laughed mirthlessly and dragged the guard into a side office.

'Do I have to wear his awful clothes?'

+No. There's no time. Just let me see his face.+

Carl rolled the man so he was staring up at him, and I wore Carl's eyes for moment to get a clear view.

+All right. Are you ready?+

‘Just do it.’

I reached out with my mind and gently began to kneed the muscles of Carl’s face. He whimpered in discomfort. I slackened some, tightened others, caused flesh to swell and droop, pinched eyelids. His face was like clay.

It hurt him a lot.

‘Are you done?’ he slurred, his lips ill-fitting.

+Just about. It’ll do. You’ve got about five minutes before it starts to relax.+

‘Throne, it hurts!’

+Move, Carl!+

He started back towards the gates, limping, coming into plain view and pushing past the banks of optical scanners.

Several guards turned and trained their weapons on him.

‘Hold it, you... Jagson?’

‘Bastard got me!’ Carl slurred. ‘Bastard got me and took my kit!’

The guards started to scramble towards the gate. ‘Be advised,’ one yelled into his link. ‘Intruder may be disguised as staff security and using Jagson’s permit!’

Two of the men vaulted the gate in their hurry.

Carl limped on past them, ignored.

Almost.

‘So why are you wearing his clothes?’ another guard asked.

‘Bastard left me bare-ass naked,’ Carl growled, fighting to stop his unnaturally slackened lips from drooling.

‘You okay?’

‘Just need some air. Hit my head hard...’

Carl limped on. The exit arch of the portico seemed so far away.

+Keep going.+

Another fifty metres. Another forty. Moving as fast as he dared without drawing attention to himself.

Ten metres.

‘Hey! Hey!’

Carl stopped and turned slowly. ‘What?’

‘You want me to get a medicae to check you out, Jagson?’

‘No thanks. Just let me catch my breath. I’ll be fine.’

Another few steps. The smell of the rain. The night air.

Carl was out.

A FEW AT a time, they came back to me in the ruined stack hideaway. Patience and Zael first, followed by Zeph, who’d taken a few extra minutes to conceal his transport in a lockup storage hut.

+You did well.+

Patience nodded, and went into the mouldering bedroom to strip off her ragged clothes and put on something a little more Patience Kys.

‘You too, Zael,’ I said, switching to transponder. The boy wasn’t listening. He was trying to peer around the door into the room where Patience was changing.

Wystan Frauka put down his slate, leaned forward, and gently turned the boy’s head to face me.

‘Adults only, kiddo,’ he said.

Zael scowled, partly because his view had been deprived, mostly because Frauka had leaned back on the sofa and, under the show of reading his slate, taken a good, connoisseur’s eyeful himself.

A kineblade whacked into the seat back beside Frauka’s neck and quivered.

‘Hey, just checking you were okay, Patti,’ Frauka said, A second kineblade thumped in beside the first. ‘Not a Patti. Right,’ said Frauka, unruffled, and turned back to his read and his latest smoke. The kineblades pulled themselves out and hovered back into the bedroom.

‘You did well, Zael,’ I repeated.

‘Did I?’

‘How did you feel it went?’

‘Okay?’ he shrugged.

‘You played your part.’

Yeah, like Mr Thonius said. With the faked-up hand prints. Is this what it’s like?’

‘What?’

‘Being part of an inquisitor’s warband?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘There wasn’t much... war.’

‘Then thank the Emperor for that,’ I told him. ‘Go get yourself some refreshment.’

Zael wandered away and found the bags of salt rind and the swoter loaves we’d bought the night before.

Zeph came in, damp with rain.

‘Any problems?’ I asked him.

He shook his head.

‘Were you followed?’

He looked at me as if to question the temerity of such a suggestion.

‘Watch the stairwell, please.’

Zeph took out his handgun, armed it, and went back out into the dim hallway.

Twenty-eight minutes later, Nayl and Kara arrived. They came in and began to strip off their packs.

‘Well done,’ I said.

‘Is Carl out?’ asked Kara.

‘He’s on his way.’

‘I heard there was a problem,’ Nayl said.

‘Everything’s fine. Carl got what we wanted.’

Frauka tossed him a lit lho-stick and Nayl caught it in his teeth. 'Sweet,' Nayl said.

CARL THONIUS ARRIVED last. I heard some banter on the stairs, Zeph pretending he didn't recognise Carl and threatening to whale on him.

There was a heated exchange.

'That awful man's a complete frigwit,' Carl said when he came in. Truth was, he didn't look like Carl Thonius. Nor did he look like the guard whose visage I had moulded. The slackening had begun, the stroke-like collapse of muscle tension as the effect faded. Carl looked dreadful, and though the process was passing, it was painful as it wore off.

'Holy Throne,' said Patience.

'Just don't look at me,' Carl said, and wandered into the bedroom.

+You did well, Carl. Really well.+

'Whatever.'

ALONE IN THE bedroom, Carl sat down on a creaking chair in front of the dressing mirror and gazed at his face. Tears welled in his eyes as he tugged at the misshapen muscles and tissue with his fingertips.

He knew the suffering would end soon, and he'd get his face back. He tried to take his hands away, but the right hand stayed there, pinching and pulling at the flesh of his face.

He had to grip his right wrist with his left hand to drag it away.

He wanted to feel better. He'd fouled up. He'd been given a chance and he'd spoiled it. He wanted to feel better. There was a way. The way was in his coat pocket.

He knew he couldn't do that here. Not in such an intimate billet.

But the craving...

'Carl?' Patience peered in around the door. 'You okay?'

'I'll be fine. Facial transfiguration by psionic manipulation is a complex process, painful, and may take many hours to relax. Four to five hours is

the norm, after the initial slackening, though some tics and discomforts may be felt as long as forty-eight hours later.'

'The stuff you know,' she smiled.

Carl stared at himself in the dirty mirror. 'I don't know who I am any more, Kys,' he said.

'Oh, that's just the face thing,' she said, and pushed the door shut after her.

'Not what I meant,' he said at his reflection. 'Not what I meant at all.'



SIX

IT WAS A chilly morning, but at least they had been spared rain. The sky over Formal A in the heart of Petropolis lowered like grey smoke. When Deputy Magistratum Dersk Rickens got out of his matt-black transporter in the wide flagstone plaza of Templum Square, the first thing he noticed was the knot of onlookers gathered around the main doors of the grand templum, and the two uniformed officers keeping them out.

Rickens approached. He walked with a steel-shod cane, the legacy of an old line-of-duty injury. He observed the crowd. Mostly worshippers, the sick or the elderly, their sores plastered with faith paper, waiting to get into the grand templum to receive their daily blessings and the food provided by the almoners. But there were temple clerics too, young men in robes of scarlet and purple. They looked upset. Why weren't they being let inside?

The grand templum was an ancient, towering place, though it was dwarfed by the enormous Administtry towers around it. It was just one of the tens of thousands of Ecclesiarchy temples and chapels in the wide city, but it was held in particular regard because of its location. It stood at what was popularly regarded as the precise geographical centre point of Petropolis, which made it the axis of all city life and faith. It was here that the primary religious services were held, here that the chief ministers and men of office observed the feast days and holy days, here that the nobility and the highborn were baptised, married and seen to their rest. It was here that the Lord Governors Subsector were inaugurated.

With a nod to the uniforms, Rickens went through the crowd and into the templum. He loved it in here: the delicious cool, the tobacco darkness, the coloured windows, the sense of boundless space. The domed vault was so

high that the images of the God-Emperor and his primarchs painted up there were only half-visible in the candlelight.

Rickens advanced down the nave, his cane tapping against the marble tiles. He was just a tiny speck in that immensity. When his wife had passed away, he'd come here a lot, to sit and mourn in the tranquillity.

Junior Marshal Plyton suddenly appeared at a door in the west end and hurried down to him the moment she saw him.

'Morning, sir. Sorry to call you in.'

'Something you can't handle?'

'Something I think you should, sir.'

Maud Plyton was a dark-haired woman in her early twenties, her slightly thickset frame curiously at odds with her delicate features. The functional duty uniform and harness she wore were not flattering to her build.

Rickens thought highly of her. She was a sharp-witted and extremely capable officer. It worried him that she thought this was something she couldn't deal with herself.

'Particulars?' he asked as they started to walk towards the west end.

'A senior cleric of the templum, Archdeacon Aulsman, has died.'

'In here?'

'No, sir. In the old sacristy, actually, but I thought we should close the entire place until we've checked over everything.'

'And what's the answer to the question?' Rickens said. Plyton smiled. Rickens was the head of the Department of Special Crimes, the smallest and most underfunded of the hive's Magistratum divisions. Their remit was essentially to investigate anything that did not fit into the procedural scope of the other departments. They got the odd, the weird, the nonsensical and, most often, the downright boring wastes of time nobody else wanted to be bothered with.

'The question' was what Rickens always asked his officers. Why us? Why has this been given to Special Crimes?

‘Because we don’t know what sort of crime it is, or even if it is a crime,’ Plyton said. ‘The beat marshals who were first on the scene called it in to us because they didn’t know who else to vox.’

‘I see.’

‘There’s also the sensitivity issue, sir,’ said Plyton. ‘That’s why I sent for you. The suspicious death of a senior cleric in what is, let’s face it, the most revered sacred building in the hive. I thought we should be seen to be dealing with it seriously.’

Smart woman, Rickens thought. They passed through the west entrance, and out along a wide exterior cloister to the door of the old sacristy. Though now regarded as a side chapel and annexe of the grand templum, the sacristy was actually an entirely separate building. It predated the templum itself by nearly three centuries, and had actually been the city’s original high church in the early years. As Petropolis expanded and grew, the sacristy was deemed too slight and small to properly serve a thriving hive-state, and the grand templum had been raised beside it, eclipsing it and turning it into just one of the many buildings – dormitories, almshouses, beneficent chapels and church schools – that clustered around the grand templum’s skirts.

They entered the sacristy. Though far smaller than the grand templum, it was still an impressive vault. The narrow dome was painted with gilt figures against a white field and this, together with the deep, clear-glass windows, made the place seem much lighter and brighter than the great temple.

But it also showed its great age, and the way it had been neglected in favour of its more splendid neighbour. Plaster peeled, and there were patches of damp on the limed walls. The stone flooring was worn, and the slabs cracked and uneven.

Rickens saw the scaffolding at once. It was hard to miss it, especially because of the man hanging by the neck from the upper platform.

‘That the reverend cleric?’ asked Rickens. ‘Or is there something you’re not telling me?’

‘That’s him,’ Plyton said. ‘We left him in situ while we covered the scene. Medicae mortus and forensic fysik are waiting to move in.’

‘He hanged himself,’ Rickens said.

‘He hanged to death, yes,’ replied Plyton. ‘More than that, we don’t know. Suicide, murder, accident...’ She shrugged.

The scaffolding was a huge structure that reached right up into the bowl of the dome. Pews had been cleared aside to accommodate it. Drip sheets had been stretched out, and there were piles of unassembled scaffolding, along with artist’s equipment and pails of paint and lime. Two more of Rickens’s junior marshals were present, Broers and Rodinski. Broers was standing beside a long-haired young man in paint-spattered overalls who was sitting on a pew.

‘What do we know?’ Rickens asked.

‘The sacristy is undergoing cleaning and restoration, sir,’ said Plyton. ‘Archdeacon Aulsman was responsible for supervising and approving the work.’

‘Who’s the young man?’

‘A limner. Name’s Yrnwood. Part of the restoration team working on the dome. He’s eager, very skilled, I think, loves his work. He came in early this morning, to put in a few extra hours. It seems he found something up there, sir. When Aulsman looked in to see how he was getting on, Yrnwood took him up the scaffolding and showed him what he’d found. And then...’

‘Then?’

‘Yrnwood’s not making much sense. Aulsman was troubled, apparently. Upset. Before Yrnwood understood what was happening, the archdeacon had fallen off the scaffolding. Either he got tangled in a trailing rope on the way down, or it was already around his neck. Anyway, here we are.’

‘And you make of it what?’ Rickens asked her.

‘Like I said. A nasty accident. An unconventional suicide. Or someone – and the fingers would point at Yrnwood – killed him.’

Rickens looked around the sacristy again. There was something about the place that had always made him feel uncomfortable. In the days

immediately after his wife's passing, he'd come here first, assuming the sacristy would be more private and soothing than the grand templum. But for all its lime-wash white and glowing gilt, it had seemed oppressive. Enclosing. After a few visits, he'd taken to sitting in the umbran shadows of the grand templum instead.

'If Aulsman killed himself, we'll soon know,' Rickens said.

'I've already got Limbwall running background checks,' Plyton said. 'Trying to turn up any private troubles.'

'Tell him to be thorough. Secret debts. Hidden illness. The usual things, up to and including shameful secrets involving altar boys or dining hall waitresses.'

'Of course.'

'Thorough, but circumspect, Plyton. I want to find secrets, not create a juicy scandal.'

'Sir.'

Rickens tapped his way over to Broers and the young man. The young man was very handsome, in a wild, artistic way. Long, agile fingers, long hair romantically flecked with dots of paint. A long face, narrow and bony, with the sort of stark cheekbones Rickens had last seen on himself in his graduation pict. Magistratum Induction, class of seventy-two. *Two hundred and seventy-two.*

I'm getting old, Rickens thought.

'Rickens, Special Crime. What can you tell me, Master Yrnwood?'

The young limner looked up. His eyes were wet with tears, and he was shaking. 'He just fell off.'

'Why did he fall?'

'He was upset. I'd showed him what I'd found. It surprised me too, of course. But when he saw it, he... he just went to pieces. He was shouting these things I didn't understand and—'

'What had you found, Master Yrnwood?'

'The other ceiling, sir.'

Rickens looked up at the dome and then back down at the restorer. ‘Other ceiling?’

Yrnwood swallowed. ‘I’ve been working on the dome for weeks now. Replacing the gilt where the damp had got to it. It’s bad in places. You have to lie on your back on the scaffold and work above you. It’s tiring on the arms.’

‘I bet.’

‘Some parts have just collapsed. I mean, the lime plaster’s like wet paper, and just hanging off. There was a particularly bad bit up there.’

The limner rose and pointed to a shadowy black stain on the roof just above the golden shoulder of Saint Kiodrus.

‘It was really going, with the recent rains, so I came in early to try and seal it before it spread. I got up there, and it just came away.’

Rickens saw a splattered mess of old plaster and shredded mulch on the sacristy floor under the scaffolding.

‘I thought for a second the whole dome was going to fall on me,’ Yrnwood went on. ‘Then I saw the hole. It’s quite big. A hole right through the dome. So I got a lamp and looked up through it.’

‘What did you see, Master Yrnwood.’

‘The other roof, like I said. This dome is a false ceiling. There’s a cavity up there, and beyond it. There’s a whole other dome about two metres above it. It’s painted. I mean, the frescos are beautiful. So very old. There’s no record of it. I mean, it must have been hidden up there for centuries. Centuries! Why would they cover something like that over? Why doesn’t anyone know about it?’

‘This is what you showed the archdeacon?’

Yrnwood nodded glumly. ‘He was intrigued. Excited, when I told him. He climbed up, and borrowed my light. Looked through. Then he simply went... mad.’

‘Describe mad.’

‘He came back out of the hole, and first off he was just murmuring and shaking. Then he started shouting, and threw the lamp at me. I ducked. I didn’t want to fall. Next thing I knew...’

‘He was dead.’

Yrnwood nodded.

Rickens looked around at his juniors. ‘Anyone else taken a look?’

Broers and Rodinski shrugged. ‘Not yet, sir,’ Plyton admitted.

‘Maud,’ Rickens said. ‘There’s no way in the world I’m going to get up there. With my hip.’

Plyton nodded. Rickens only called her Maud when he really needed her. She stripped off her gloves, unhooked her helmet from her belt, tossed the gloves inside it and handed it to Broers. Then she slid out her power maul and gave that to him too.

‘Be careful,’ Rickens said.

‘I’ve a head for heights,’ she grinned.

‘That’s not actually what I mean,’ Rickens muttered.

Plyton started up the scaffold ladder. The entire structure trembled slightly as she went. The lashed ladders zigzagged up the scaffolding frame.

The air had become very cold by the time she reached the top platform. The last part of the climb had taken her right up past Aulsman’s body, so close she had looked into his bloodshot eyes and seen the swollen, mauve flesh of his throttled face. His body had begun to pendulum slightly from the vibrations of her ascent.

Maud Plyton had no head for heights at all, but she was damned if she’d let her beloved superior down. The floor of the chapel was so far away now, the figures looking up at her were the size of dolls.

‘Crap,’ she whispered, as she finally dared to rise to her feet on the top platform. So high up. The platform boards did not quite meet, and she could see the drop between them. That was so much worse. That, and the vibration.

Look up, she told herself. The dome was just above her face. What had looked splendid and golden from the ground was mouldering and rotten close up. She could smell the decay, see the gilt tissue peeling like scabs from the blind faces of disintegrating worthies. Saint Kiodrus's face had discoloured so much that it looked as dark and dead as the archdeacon's.

Left hand out for balance, Plyton walked along the boards, plucking her service stablight from her belt and switching it on. The tight bright lance shone like a laser-beam in the cool gloom.

She saw the hole, the mucky, blackened puncture in the ceiling. The smell of rot was more intense here. Old air, stagnant like water that had stood too long. The smell wafted out of the hole.

She looked up through the hole, aiming her light.

'Oh, Holy Throne...' she said.

'Plyton?' her vox-link buzzed. 'Plyton, what can you see?'

'Another ceiling, sir,' she said. 'Like the man said. A whole other dome above this one. It extends... Throne, I can't see how far. So old, so very old...'

Golden images, figures, faces, intagliated beams, lapis lazuli and pure selpic, ornate lettering in traced silver, lines and constellations, a hint of some vast organised chart that covered the ceiling.

'Plyton? Maud?'

'Sir, it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.'



SEVEN

TWO DAYS AFTER Carl's successful penetration of the Informium Depository, my team took up occupation of a rented townhouse in the ninth ward of Formal E.

The house was called Miserimus, and it was a dank, sulking manse of rain-eaten ouslite and formstone that stood in a quiet up-stack neighbourhood of private gardens and secluded mansions.

The lease was acquired in the name of Morten Narvon. The forename was that of a childhood friend of Nayl's, the family name that of the first boy Kara had kissed. Carl Thonius's devious concealed graft program had done the rest, including transferring down-payment from an obscured account to the rental guild. Hidden within the Informium's data-core, the graft program could now provide anything we needed, not falsified but genuinely created by the unimpeachable archive of all records. It was superb work, but I think none of us showed proper appreciation to Carl. It was the sort of thing we expected from him. He remained sullen and unhappy about the way things had gone.

The empty halls and chambers of the unfurnished townhouse were cold and unfamiliar, but it was a home of sorts, a safe house. We settled in. Carl and Patience went out and purchased some simple items of furniture to make it liveable. They used false names and false accounts provided by the graft. In those first few days, that became the game. My friends would sit around and dream up alter egos, and Carl would tap his codifier, send them through the Informium's data-wash, and make them real. It cheered him up somewhat to amuse the others with his skill.

There was a tension however. An apprehension about the task ahead. We had names, most of which Skoh had provided: Akunin, Vygold, Marebos,

Foucault, Strykson, Braeden. Each one the shipmaster of a rogue trader. Each one a member of the Contract Thirteen cartel.

‘Search them down,’ I told Carl. ‘Find out if any are logged as on planet. Find me backgrounds and trade histories. Find me connections. What links them?’

Carl nodded.

‘You have the Informium at your disposal now, Carl. The central registry of data in this subsector. And you can use it to sift and search it invisibly. Do so.’

Carl had set up in the east bedroom, his equipment resting on packing cases. His cogitators had a vapour link to the local wireless mast (registered, via the graft, to an invented rickshaw firm) and dry/ground splices to the main civic data conduits in the street outside, courtesy of a midnight pavement excavation by Nayl and Zeph. He also had click-links to the municipal vox system and landlines.

‘What else am I looking for?’ he asked.

‘Links to the Ministry of Subsector Trade,’ I replied. ‘Anything fuzzy, anything irregular. Jader Trice especially. We can’t be sure, but there’s a better than good chance he knew he was sending us downriver into a death trap when he teamed us with his agents last year. Who knows? Trice may be clean and the conspiracy might be operating at a level below him. But I met him and I doubt it. By the same token, look upwards.’

‘At the lord governor?’

‘At the lord governor. If Barazan himself is involved, I need to know as soon as possible. It makes our action here so much harder if this rot has spread to the very top.’

‘I’ll get to work,’ Carl said.

‘One last thing,’ I said. ‘See what you can recover concerning the Divine Fraternity.’

Carl nodded again. I’d told him everything about the warning my oncementor Eisenhorn had delivered on Malinter, six months earlier. *Thorn* had been quite specific. The Divine Fraternity, a cult of seers based on Nova

Durma, who delighted in farseeing the future and then manipulating it to their own dark ends, had seen something – a prospect – that concerned either me or one of my team. We would awaken something here on Eustis Majoris before the end of the year, which was just a few short months away now, and the Imperium would pay dearly for that mistake. The danger went by the name of Slyte or Sleight or Sleet or something of that form. I hated farseers. I'd done enough farseeing myself in my early days with the eldar to know that way led only to madness.

I was also concerned about the Cognitae connection. The Cognitae was – is – a cult school for genius heretical minds ran nearly a century before by a witch named Lilean Chase. My nemesis, the now-dead Zygmunt Molotch, had been a pupil of that school. Though shut down, its hand was in everything, stirring, tainting, fiddling. So many of its brethren were out there, unrecognised. I had encountered a shipmaster on my way into Lucky Space, a man named Siskind. He had been of the Cognitae bloodline, and his cousin, Kizary Thekla, master of the *Oktober Country*, had been the primary architect of our fate at Bonner's Reach.

Although deceased, one member of the Contract Thirteen cartel had enjoyed strong Cognitae associations. It made me worry. Were we entering a war as bloody and deceitful as the campaign we had waged against the bastard Molotch?

I left Carl to his work, and glided along the empty halls of the townhouse. In one room, I saw Kara working out against a makeshift punch bag. Her compact, voluptuous body was clad only in tight shorts and a vest, and it moved wonderfully as she slammed blow after blow at the target. I so resented my enclosed state.

Nearby, Wystan Frauka was asleep on a window seat. I pinched my mind and extinguished his still-burning lho-stick as I slid past. In the next room, Kys and Zeph sat either side of an upturned box and played regicide. Kys was laughing coyly. I sensed how much she was attracted to Mathuin, and how little of that infatuation he realised.

In the next room down the hall, Harlon Nayl, stripped to the waist, was standing before a trestle table on which the tools of his trade were laid out. Autoguns, laspistols, bolters, sense-rifles, grenades, daggers and estocs, throwing darts, revolvers, pump-guns, sting-blunts, synapse disruptors, ammo drums, mags, individual loads, a matched pair of fighting poniards, a longlas, an Urdeshi-made assault weapon.

I watched him as he selected each weapon in turn, spun it, slammed home a clip, aimed, dry-fired, then unloaded swiftly and cleaned. It was like watching a conjurer at work, a cardsharp. So smooth, so deft. So certain. He reached down and grabbed a twinned set of nine mil Hostec 5 autos, burnished in gold, raised, them, one in each hand, spun them forward, spun them back – *Click! Clack! Click!* – smacked them into grip, forward spun them again and then set them down.

I wasn't the only one watching. In the corner of the room, I spied Zael. He was staring in awe at Nayl's activities.

'What do they do?' he asked.

'The 5's? They kill folk.'

'How?'

'Your basic squeeze and forget. Self-aiming. One touch drains the clip. Here's the slide, see?'

'Where?'

Nayl beckoned him over and racked back the top of one of the golden pistols. 'See, the ejector port here? The safety? Here's where the mag loads in...'

I left them to their study.

One final room to visit, and I did so only with my mind. The 'guest bedroom'. Locked, the room was bare except for a wooden chair in the middle of the room. Skoh sat on the chair, his wrists manacled, and the manacles secured by a long chain to an iron peg Mathuin had secured through a floor joist. The chain gave him enough slack to walk around the chair, or lie down beside it on a blanket. The window, the door and the walls were out of reach.

We checked on him regularly. He never seemed to do anything except sleep, or sit silently on the chair, staring at the wall. It was tempting to think he was broken and harmless. But Skoh was a huntsman, one of the very best, and that meant he excelled at stillness and patience.

I knew he was only waiting for us to make a mistake.

MY LINK BIPPED. It was Carl.

‘Tchaikov,’ he said. ‘Keeps coming up. If not banker to the cartel, then money launderer at the very least.’

‘We thought as much. Can we get anything on her?’

‘No, it’s a dead connect. I can’t hack her systems. We’ll have to face-to-face with her.’

‘Understood.’

‘She fronts a fabric import place in Formal K.’

‘Then that’s where we’ll go. But we have to be careful.’

‘Careful. I couldn’t agree more.’

Carl and I had not been idle during our months spent in transit aboard Unwerth’s vessel. We had been preparing the ground, investigating, searching data, developing evidence. All inquisitors do this. If they tell you they don’t, they’re either lying or incompetent. I know for a fact my old mentor Eisenhorn would spend months, years sometimes, locking together the intricate webs of data that supported his investigations. Any effort of the Inquisition founders immediately if the ground is not well prepared.

I had a back-file of data on Contract Thirteen that filled twenty-six slates. Carl and I charted the threads together on a tri-D strategium that Fyflank rigged up in the belly hold of the *Arethusia*. Such an obedient, capable creature, that man-hound. I am sure Unwerth underestimates him.

Two light-days out from Eustis Majoris, Carl and I finally settled on our preferred strategy. The names, the places, the links. Where we would look first. As an analogy, imagine a verthin nest. You know the thing – that great hummock of chewed material, populated by a billion billion stinging

insects. Stick a probe in, dig it in, and you'll be stung badly by a swarm of soldier verthin, most of which you have no business with. Petropolis is like that. You need to be delicate, careful, extend your probes without hostility into the bowels to get results.

There has to be a careful process of enquiry and inspection, divulging secrets without the keepers of those secrets knowing you've exposed them. Delicacy is the key.

That's why we had the strategy. None of us wanted to get stung.

We would put it together, carefully, piece by piece.

Now Tchaikov seemed to be the first.

THE HARD-NOSE ROUND struck a steel cabinet, glanced off, and started to tumble. It passed through a stack of files on the nearby desk and hit Harlon Nayl in the upper left arm, deformed and flat-on.

There was a puff of blood and a spatter of meat and Nayl started to fall, growling in pain.

So much for bloody careful.

'You snotwipe,' spat Patience Kys and pinned the moody hammer's neck to the doorpost with two kineblades.

Dying, twitching, he dropped the autopistol, blue smoke still spilling from its muzzle.

Nayl came up behind the desk, his left arm streaming with blood, and fired his Tronsvasse Heavy twice. A second hammer folded and fell hard as he came in through the door.

'We've started something,' Nayl grimaced.

'No, d'you think?' Kys replied.

Las-rounds started to whip down the hallway outside. They broke in blossoms of orange flame as they impacted.

+Where's Tchaikov?+

'No, honestly, I'm fine thanks,' Nayl growled, returning fire on auto. His weapon made a dull, dead sound in the enclosed chamber.

‘I’ve got her,’ Kara reported. She was in the corridor outside, overlooking the vast loading bay of the fabric importer warehouse, high in stack 567 of Formal K. There was the tiny, round-shouldered figure of Tchaikov, scurrying away under escort to a waiting flier. Already, the massive exit hatch of the bay was winching open on thick, catenary chains.

Kara leapt off the balcony into the bay, somersaulting, an Urdeshi machine pistol in each hand.

She was firing before she even landed. Her caseless rounds stripped through the hammers around Tchaikov, bursting blood steam into the cold air of the dock, dropping them like stones.

Tchaikov turned.

She was tall, her black hair pinned in a bun, her face sheathed behind a molidiscu mask of silver velvet. She wore a long gown of embroidered ordskin that swirled around her like gleaming smoke as she faced Kara. Gold and red and pamaganter. Her long legs were bound in white linen, her feet arched high on brass clogs.

‘Face to face,’ Kara said, tossing the empty machine pistols away to either side so they slithered across the deck. ‘And research says...?’

+Carl is sure her favoured weapon is the litoge whip.+

‘Let’s hope Carl’s right,’ Kara replied, drawing the shivered sword sheathed over her back.

The sword had been mine – when I’d been a wielder of such hand weapons – long ago. Forged so hard by the hammers of master smiths, the blade had been knocked slightly sideways in time, so it resonated and shivered against the mundane now.

A beautiful weapon, and Kara Swole was beautiful enough to wield it.

Tchaikov produced her weapon. A litoge whip, just as Carl had predicted. Eight metres of thin, coiling, sentient iron, manufactured by an abominable race who dwelt deep in the outworlds.

The winding length of the whip curled in the air and flew at Kara, hungry.

She swept up with the sword, and took a metre off the whip. The cut length fell to the deck, its fused end fizzling.

Tchaikov cried out and lashed again. Another two metres of living metal flew away, smouldering at the cut.

Tchaikov ripped out yet again with her truncated weapon, and this time the shorn tip glanced away from Kara's block.

'Got anything else, bitch?' Kara said, her hand braced on the raised shivered sword.

Tchaikov dropped the litoge whip. It fell dead on the deck.

She turned and reached a hand out towards the open hatchway of her flier.

A sword flew into her grasp. It was a power-weapon, the blade wide and long, the grip double-handed, keyed to her response. Even from a distance, I could smell and taste its thirst. Blood. It was vampire steel, hungry and insolent.

'I have *this*, bitch,' Tchaikov replied, and executed a flourish with the blade.

Holding her shivered sword up in her right hand, Kara beckoned with the fingers of her left.

'Then let's go,' she said.

'WELL, THIS IS unexpectedly annoying,' Carl Thonius said.

'What is?' I asked.

'This,' he said, indicating the engraved glass cube sitting on the top of an otherwise plain burrwood desk in Tchaikov's private quarters.

'Oh, good,' I replied. 'For a moment I thought you were still banging on about the slight tear in your furnzi mantle.'

He looked wounded, and glanced sadly at the pulled threads on the hem of his expensive, fur-lined cape. He'd caught it on a doorpost coming in.

'Well, that is a dreadful crime. I love this mantle so. But I had put it out of my mind and moved on to other doings. How shallow do you think I am?'

'Want me to answer that?' I replied. 'We're raiding a premises, and you come dressed up for a gaudy night.'

Carl adored fine clothes, and prided himself on his turn-out. For this endeavour, where the rest of the team were wearing bodygloves and wire armour, he'd chosen the mantle, a silk blouse embroidered with silver thread, perskin pantaloons and little slippers of gold crepe.

'You can talk,' he said. 'You got dressed up too.'

It was true. I had. I was waring Zeph Mathuin. My physical form was a considerable distance away, in Miserimus House, watched over by Wystan and Zael. My mind had possessed Mathuin's body for the duration of the mission.

Waring is a skilful, strange activity. I am able to ware almost anyone, though the level of trauma for both me and the subject increases dramatically if they are unwilling. I hardly ever used Nayl, Kys or Carl this way, except in emergencies: it was too much like hard work. Kara was more pliant, though waring left her weary and strung out. For some reason, Zeph was the most usable candidate in my team. I could slip in and out of his mind with a minimum of pain. He never objected. It was one of the reasons he remained in my employ.

Waring gave me a physical presence I otherwise lacked, and the opportunity to employ the skills and talents of the subject directly. Zeph Mathuin was a tall and powerful man, an ex-bounty hunter like Nayl. His skin was dark, and his black hair tightly braided out down his back. His eyes were little unreadable coals of red-hard light. His left hand was a polished chrome augmetic tool. He was a mystery, his past a secret, a blank. Even from inside his mind, I knew little about him except that which he was prepared to tell me. I never probed. Mathuin worked for me because he liked the work and he was good at it. He could keep his secrets; that was all that mattered.

Clothed in his flesh, I felt strong and vital. I felt the weight of his leather stormcoat hanging from his shoulders, I felt the solidity of the matt-black Bakkhaus laspistol in his right hand, I felt the beat of his heart as if it were my own.

'What is it?' I asked, gesturing with Mathuin's hand at the cube.

‘Unless I’m mistaken – which I’m not – it’s a gullivat riddle box. Rare. Priceless, actually. It explains a lot.’

‘I’m glad. Now you explain a lot.’

Thonius shrugged. ‘It explains why we’re here. We were forced to mount this raid because I couldn’t hook in to Tchaikov’s data systems covertly from outside. Couldn’t get a line, not even the whiff of data heat. This is why. She doesn’t use a data system.’

‘Not at all?’

‘You see any cogitators? Any codifiers? Any data engines at all?’

He was right. The room was devoid of any computation devices. There wasn’t even any electrical wiring, no ports, no vox links, nothing. Tchaikov ran her entire operation on paper, the old-fashioned way. There was nothing that could be hacked or broken into.

‘She’s from Punzel. They pride themselves on mental rigour there, the old ways. Didn’t you see the abacus frames the warehouse stackers were using as we came in?’

I had.

‘Plus, of course, the records suggest Tchaikov was Cognitae-trained. The Cognitae use machines as little as possible, preferring to trust their own minds.’

‘Indeed.’

‘We could take her paper files – if we had a bulk lifter – and check through them, but I can tell you now, they’d only be legit accounts and manifests. Her secrets are in here. Stored in a non-electronic format.’

I raised Zeph’s pistol and head shot a moody hammer who had run into the chamber behind Carl.

Carl flinched. ‘Throne! Some warning, if you don’t mind!’

‘You mean like “Look out Carl, there’s a man behind you with a gun, oops too late, he’s shot you”? That kind of thing?’

‘Smart ass. You know about riddle boxes, don’t you?’

‘Not really.’

He stroked the edges of the glass cube gently. ‘They were made by the gullivat three thousand years ago, before they suffered their cultural backslide. The gullivat are now a proto-primitive race unable to fathom the mechanisms they created. They adored secrets and puzzles. Indeed, to this day, no one knows why their culture collapsed in the first place. The riddle boxes are artefacts. They come up for sale, once in a while. I doubt Tchaikov was rich enough to buy one. The cartel must have given her this to run their dealings.’

‘How does it work?’

‘It’s inert, a crystal cube within a crystal cube within a crystal cube, et cetera. There’s no way of knowing how many layers it has. Usually, they are built with anything from ten to seventeen layers. You see the figures carved into the sides?’

‘Yes?’

The riddle box must be turned, each layer in sequence, carefully rotated, until a final alignment is made. Then it opens. Inside, there will be a codex stone, the size of a small pebble, a perfect glass sphere onto which all Tchaikov’s secrets are etched in microscopic form.’

I glanced around. Outside, in a nearby hall, I could hear Nayl and Kys engaging fiercely with the last of Tchaikov’s household guards.

‘Are you sure?’ I asked. ‘It could be just a curio, an ornament.’

Carl shook his head. He pointed to a side table on which sat a complex instrument that looked like a microscope to me. ‘There’s the reader. You place the sphere in here, and study it via the scope. And look, here’s the etching needle mount that swings in when she wants to add new information.’

‘So we just break it open,’ I suggested.

‘It’s constructed to grind the sphere clean if the cubes are tampered with.’

‘I see. So why didn’t Mamzel Tchaikov take this vital piece of data storage with her?’

‘Because they’re not called riddle boxes for no reason,’ Carl said. ‘Unless you know the key, they’re utterly impossible to open.’

I was about to retort, but a las-round ripped across the chamber between us and hit the far wall, bringing down a silk hanging. Two house guards, both hammers of the K Bright clan, had burst in through the west door, weapons up. I started to turn, but Carl had already swung round, bringing up the Hecuter 6 Will Tallowhand had given him years before.

The 6 barked loudly, its fatnose rounds slamming both hammers back off their feet in showers of gore. Empty casings tinkled onto the marble floor. Carl walked over to the twitching bodies, and put a round through each one's forehead.

Carl Thonius was famously unhappy around guns. In fact, he was all but allergic to combat and physical confrontation. He was a thinker – a near-genius thinker – not a doer, and that was partly what endeared him to me and made me choose him as my interrogator. Let Nayl and the others handle the bloodshed. Carl's worth was his mind and all the skills that lay within it.

Indeed, he'd never fired his weapon in anger before that awful night on Flint, a year ago, and then only in desperation. Now he used it with the nerve and confidence of a seasoned gunslinger. I was impressed, and not a little unnerved.

'You've been practising,' I said.

'Oh, you know...' he replied, bashfully bolstering the piece. 'The cosmos moves on and all that. Besides, I was tired of you taking the piss all the time.'

'Me?'

'No, Mathuin.'

'This box, Carl. Who has the key?'

He smiled. 'My guess... Tchaikov and Tchaikov alone.'

+Kara. Whatever you do, don't kill Tchaikov.+

'NOT ACTUALLY A problem,' Kara Swole replied, diving sideways in order to keep her head attached to her shoulders. Tchaikov's vampiric blade

raked sparks from the metal deck. ‘Any chance you could give this bitch the same advice, vis-a-vis me?’

+She’s wearing some sort of damper. I can’t get in. Sorry.+

‘I had to ask.’

Kara leapt up and around, and cycled with the shivered sword, but Tchaikov was there to deflect the strike – a ringing chime – and then plough under with a gut-stab.

The very tip of the power blade managed to slice into Kara’s midriff armour and draw blood before she managed to cartwheel clear.

Tasting blood, the vampire sword began to scream.

‘Soon,’ Tchaikov said, patting the sweating blade.

Kara landed stuck, feet wide, shivered sword horizontal at forehead height, left arm extended. Tchaikov turned her back and then came in again, sweeping up and low as she twisted. The blades met... once, twice, three times, four times, parry and redirect.

‘It’s tasted you now,’ Tchaikov spat. ‘This is over.’

Kara blocked two more strokes, then staggered back, gasping. She clutched her belly and stared in disbelief. Blood was leaving her body. It was leaving her body through the cut, tumbling in droplets through the air, the slow arc of red drizzle pulled towards Tchaikov’s blade.

Kara fell on her knees. Her blood was flying out of her now, like red streamers, flowing towards the thirsty sword, collecting like dew on the blade.

It was sucking her dry.

‘Throne!’ Kara gasped. ‘Help me...’

Patience Kys landed on the loading deck with a thump. Her kineblades orbited about her body like pilot fish around a shark. She blinked and they flew forward at Tchaikov... and then clattered to the deck, dead, a few metres from her. Tchaikov’s damper had cancelled out Kys’s telekinesis.

‘Oh gods!’ Kara cried, falling onto her side, trying to stop the blood from leaving her body with her hands.

Patience ran forward a few steps, but Tchaikov turned and aimed the point of the blade at her.

‘You’ll be next, witch,’ she warned.

‘No, I’ll be next,’ said Harlon Nayl. He staggered onto the dock through one of the inner gates, his bloody left arm limp at his side. His right hand raised and aimed his Tronsvasse Heavy.

Tchaikov turned to face him, Kara’s lifeblood drooling off her blade.

Nayl fired. Tchaikov swung the sword and deflected the shot so it ricocheted away across the warehouse and buried itself in a bale of fabric.

Nayl fired again, and again Tchaikov knocked the round aside in mid-air with her sword.

Nayl nodded, impressed. ‘A guy like me could grow to love a woman who can do that,’ he said.

Tchaikov bowed slightly in acknowledgement, and then readdressed, her sword upright in both hands, angled over her right shoulder.

Nayl raised his handgun again and slid his thumb across the selector lever.

‘How do you do on full auto?’ he asked.

The gun began to fire, roaring, one squeeze of the trigger unloading the full clip at auto-max. To her credit, Tchaikov parried the first three shots.

The fourth hit her in the left thigh, the fifth took off her right leg at the knee. She fell and the rest went wide.

The sword clattered to the deck, and then began to inch itself towards the pool of hot blood spreading from Tchaikov’s severed leg. It rattled itself into the pool and began to drink.

Tchaikov moaned, twitching.

Nayl bolstered his weapon and walked over to her. He squeezed his gunshot left arm with his right hand and spattered blood onto the ground. The sword writhed and turned, scenting a fresh victim. It slithered towards Nayl.

He squeezed his wound harder and more blood spurted out. That was too much for the sword. It flew at him.

He side-stepped, and caught it by the hilt as it flew by. As soon as it was in his hand, he wrenched round violently and swung it down into the deck.

It took three, savage blows before the blade finally shattered. By then, the deck was deeply gouged. The blade wailed as it died.

Nayl threw the broken hilt away. He walked over to Tchaikov.

‘The key, please,’ he said.

‘Never!’ she hissed.

‘You’re bleeding out fast, mamzel,’ he noted.

‘Then I will die,’ she replied, her rapid breath wafting her molidiscu mask.

‘Doesn’t have to be that way,’ Nayl said.

‘What? Are you proposing to save me? Spare me? Get me to the medicaes?’

Nayl shook his head. He reloaded his handgun and aimed it at her right temple. ‘My offer is to make it quick. One brief instant of pain compared to a slow, lingering death.’

Tchaikov gasped. ‘You are a man of honour, sir. I thank you. The key is five-two-eight six-five.’

‘And thank you,’ Nayl said. He rose and began to walk away.

‘I gave you the key!’ Tchaikov cried. ‘Now do as you promised! Finish me!’

Nayl continued to walk.

‘All right! All right!’ Tchaikov called. ‘Five-eight-two six-five! That’s the key! The real key! I lied before, but that’s the real truth! Now kill me! End this pain! Please!’

Nayl kept walking. ‘Still going to check,’ he said.



EIGHT

WYSTAN FRAUKA HEARD the low warble of the detector alarm. He shot a look at Zael and put a finger to his lips, then he got up, took a chromed autosnub from his jacket pocket, and went over to the portable vox.

He pushed the set's 'active' key.

'Yes?'

'It's us. Screen down, pop the locks and let us in.'

Frauka turned to the portable console nearby which controlled the security screens Harlon had set up around Miserimus House and deactivated them. He also turned the auto-locks.

'Clear,' he said into the vox.

A minute or two later the five figures came tramping up the stairs. Zeph Mathuin led the way, followed by Thonius, who was carrying some kind of glass box.

'How did it go?' Frauka asked Mathuin, knowing full well that it wouldn't be Mathuin who replied. Ravenor's dormant chair sat in the corner of the room where Frauka had been keeping company through the evening with Zael.

'Badly,' said Ravenor in Mathuin's voice. 'We got what we needed, but it turned into a bloodbath.'

Zael had got to his feet, and was now staring wide-eyed at the returners. Nayl had a messy wound in the arm, and he was half-carrying Kara, who looked pale and ill.

'This is beyond our basic medical ability,' said Ravenor. 'We're going to need a physician. Someone who won't ask questions.'

'I'll go find one,' said Kys grimly.

‘I know where to find one,’ said Zael. They all looked at him. ‘I come from here, remember? I know a guy.’

‘Very well,’ said Kys to the boy. ‘You’re with me.’

They hurried out. Nayl took Kara to one of the bedrooms and made her comfortable.

‘Carl, get to work deciphering the contents of the box,’ Ravenor said. ‘Oh, and check on Skoh too, please.’

Thonius nodded and hurried away with his prize.

Ravenor sat Mathuin’s body down in a battered armchair.

‘Not a good night then?’ Frauka said.

‘Tchaikov’s security was on a hair trigger. The moment they thought something was wrong, they just went off. It was bloody. We ended up torching the place to cover our tracks.’

‘You burned it down?’ Frauka asked laconically, lighting a lho-stick.

‘There were a lot of bodies,’ Ravenor said. ‘The longer it takes anyone to figure out what happened, the better. Tchaikov was a powerful underworld figure. From the mess we left, people will suspect she ran foul of a rival operation.’

Mathuin sighed. Ravenor had just released him. He blinked and looked up at Frauka.

‘Hey, Wyst,’ he said. He got to his feet. ‘I’m hungry,’ he muttered, and left the room.

The support chair hummed and swung around, prowling across the room towards Frauka.

‘So Nayl took a bullet?’ Frauka said. ‘What happened to the redhead?’

‘Some kind of warped blade.’

‘All in a night’s work.’

‘I suppose so. I’m going to check on her, then I’d better help Thonius unravel the data.’

‘Uh, before you go...’ Frauka began.

‘Yes, Wystan?’

While you were all gone, the boy seemed to get a bit edgy. So I stayed with him, just chatting, you know.'

'Improving your people skills?'

'Whatever,' Frauka took a drag on his lho-stick. He seemed uncomfortable, as if not sure how to say something. 'We talked about this and that, his past, growing up here. I think coming back to Eustis Majoris has woken up some memories. He was telling me about his granna, and his sister.'

'Well, I'm glad he was able to confide in y—'

Frauka held up a hand and waved it gently. 'No, it's not that. Do you know what his name is?'

'Of course,' Ravenor replied. 'It's Zael Efferneti. One of the first things he told me.'

'Yeah,' said Frauka. 'Efferneti. His father's family name. But in our little chat tonight, it just slipped out that Zael's ma and pa never actually applied for a marriage licence from the state.'

'So he was born out of wedlock. So what?'

'Well, just as a technicality, that would mean his surname should actually be his mother's family name, not his father's, the one he adopted. Right?'

'Right. But it is just a technicality. Why do you think that's important?'

'Because it turns out his mother's family name,' said Wystan Frauka, 'was Sleet.'

THONIUS UNLOCKED THE door and looked in. Skoh sat on the chair. The hunter slowly turned his head and looked at Carl.

'Food?' he asked.

'We're a little busy. We'll get to it.'

Skoh raised his manacled hands slightly. 'Getting cramp in my wrists again. Bad cramp.'

'All right,' said Carl with a sigh. He walked into the room until he was just beyond the reach of the floor chain. 'Show me.'

Skoh raised his hands, to show that both of the heavy steel manacles were locked tight around his wrists.

Carl nodded, took the key from his pocket and tossed it to Skoh. The hunter caught it neatly, unlocked his manacles, and growled with relief. He nursed and rubbed his wrists, flexing them and stretching them out. 'Hell, that's better.'

'That's enough,' said Carl.

Skoh finished his stretching, and locked the manacles in place again. He tossed the key back to Carl.

'Show me.'

Skoh repeated his gesture, raising his hands so that Carl could clearly see the manacles were tight and secure.

Carl walked out of the room, and locked the door behind him. His right hand was shaking again. The raid at Tchaikov's had been a real adrenaline rush, a real ride. He'd done well, he'd got what Ravenor needed. But Skoh had brought him down hard. Something about the hunter freaked Thonius out, even when he was locked up.

Carl had a sour taste in his mouth and his heart was knocking. He knew he had to get back downstairs and start work on the riddle box. But he wanted to smooth his wits out first.

He went into bathroom, pulled the bolt on the door, and took the parcel of red tissue paper out of his pocket.

THEY RODE ONE of the sink-level trains across the eastern quadrant of the city, and climbed off in a filthy substation that the signs said was in Formal J.

'This is where you grew up,' Patience said. Zael nodded.

'I'm sure I could have found a doctor closer to the house.'

'We need the right sort of doctor,' Zael said. 'The right sort, yeah? I mean one who won't ask questions or anything.'

Patience couldn't argue with that.

‘Well, there was a guy in my hab neighbourhood. We called him the Locum. I think he’s what you want.’

Hot, dirty winds scorched up the transit tunnels as other clattering trains approached. Zael led Patience up the iron stairs into the dark dripping sinks of Formal J.

It was not a good part of town. So much trash and acid wash had accumulated in the lower sinks, most foot traffic came and went on the higher walkways between the crumbling hab-stacks. They passed a few rowdy bars and dining houses, bright with lights and drunken noise, but for the most part it was a slum city, full of poverty-trapped souls who lingered in the doorways of their ratty habs, or sat on the front steps of stacks, passing around bottles without labels. The street air reeked of acid and urine. It reminded Patience a little of Urbitane, the hive stack on Sameter where she’d grown up. But there had been a spark of urgency there, a sense of life fighting to catch a break amid the squalor. Here, it felt like people had just given up all hope.

They walked for twenty more minutes, into a network of dark lanes and channels between condemned habs. A train rattled past on an elevated rail.

‘Here,’ said Zael, leading her into the ground floor of some kind of community building that had been grossly vandalised. The feral slogans of moody clans were painted on the walls.

‘Here?’ she queried.

‘You saw the sign, right? It said “surgery”.’

‘Uh huh. But it appeared to have been handwritten in blood.’

They entered a broken-down room where a few people sat around on mismatched chairs. An old man, a far-gone, an emaciated addict with the shakes, a worried-looking habwife with a small child, a young drunk with a nasty cut across his brow.

If this is triage, thought Kys, I can’t wait to see the medicae. Some rancid old quack or backstreet abortionist...

Zael led her through an inner door. The Locum was busy. A moody hammer was sitting in an old barber’s chair and, by the light of a

makeshift lamp, the Locum was stitching up the twenty centimetre gash across his shoulder. A blade wound, Kys was quite sure.

The room itself was surprisingly tidy, though nothing in it was new. There were a few pieces of medical equipment, tools thrust into a jar of anti-bact gel in a vague nod to sterility.

The Locum had his back to them as he worked. He was of medium build, slim and wiry. His hair was light brown, and he was wearing heavy lace-up boots, black combat baggies, a black vest and surgical gloves.

‘Get in line,’ he called. ‘I’ll get to everyone in turn.’

‘Hey,’ said Zael.

‘Didn’t you hear me?’ the Locum said and turned. Kys saw his face. Strong, calm, rather lined and care-drawn.

His eyes were blue and fiercely intelligent. Right now they were a little puzzled.

‘Zael?’ he said. ‘Zael Efferneti? That you, kid?’

‘Hey, Doctor Belknap.’

‘Throne, Zael. I haven’t seen you for... a year or more. Someone said you were dead.’

‘Not me,’ Zael shook his head.

‘Good. That’s good. Who’s this?’ Belknap asked, looking over at Kys.

‘She’s—’

‘A friend of Zael’s,’ said Patience. ‘I need a medicae. He recommended you.’

‘Yeah? What’s wrong with you?’

‘Nothing. But I need a medicae to come with me and treat two other friends of Zael’s.’

‘You need a medicae,’ said Belknap, ‘go to the local infirmary. Public ward.’

‘I need a certain type of medicae,’ Patience said smoothly.

‘Yeah? What type is that?’

‘The type who sews up a moody hammer’s gangfight wounds, no questions asked.’

Belknap looked back at Zael. ‘Dammit, boy! What have you gotten yourself mixed up in?’

‘Nothing bad, I swear,’ Zael said.

The Locum turned back to his work.

‘Will you come?’ Patience asked.

‘Yes. For Zael’s sake. When I’m finished here.’

THEY WAITED AN hour while he treated the people in line. Then Belknap put on an old, ex-military stormcoat, picked up a black leather practice bag and followed them out onto the sink-street.

‘You not going to lock up?’ Kys asked him.

‘Nothing worth stealing,’ said Belknap. ‘And round here, if you lock a door, folk will kick it in just to know why.’

They caught a sub-train and rattled back across the quarter through the dark, labyrinthine foundations of the hive. Just the three of them, alone in a vandalised carriage.

Kys noticed the old dog-tags on a chain around Belknap’s neck. He didn’t seem more than thirty, thirty-five, although prematurely aged.

‘Guard vet?’ she asked.

‘Company field medic. Six years. I mustered out when the chance came along.’

‘Why?’

‘Couldn’t stand the sight of blood.’

She smiled. ‘And really?’

He looked up at her. His eyes, always half-closed, as if squinting at something bright, they were really something.

‘I don’t even know your name,’ he said. ‘I’m not about to tell you my personal business.’

‘Okay. But between Guard service and sewing up stab-victims in a sink-level ruin, what?’

‘Nine years as a community medic. I had a practice in the fourth ward of Formal J.’

The carriage rocked violently as the train rode over points in the dark. Kys, who was standing, steadied herself against the handrail.

‘Why’d you stop?’ she asked.

‘I didn’t. I still serve the fourth ward in Formal J.’

‘Yeah, but not officially. You’re a back-street guy.’

‘That’s me. A real vigilante.’

‘So? Why?’

The overheads flickered on and off for a second as the jolting disrupted the live rail. The carriage flashed into strobing blue darkness. Then bare white light again.

‘You ask a lot of questions,’ said Belknap.

‘I’m inquisitive,’ Kys said. ‘Professionally.’

+Leave him alone. Stop asking him stuff.+ Zael sent.

Kys still wasn’t happy about him being able to do that. And when he did it, it hurt a little. He hadn’t refined his talent.

+I’ll ask him what I like, Zael.+ she nudged back.+We’re gonna trust him with Kara and Nayl. I wanna know we can.+

Belknap looked back and forth between them, smiling slightly. ‘What was that?’ he asked, pointing a finger at her then him. ‘You two got a private code or something?’

‘Or something,’ said Zael.

‘What is it? A gang code? Number of blinks? Secret signals?’ Belknap shook his head sadly. ‘Yeah, I’ll lay money it’s a gang code. She’s definitely connected, that one.’

‘Like you wouldn’t believe,’ said Kys.

‘And you,’ Belknap said looking at Zael. ‘I always hoped you’d escape, you know. Not slide in like all the others. I always said that, didn’t I?’

‘You did,’ admitted Zael.

‘I know the odds were stacked against you, especially in a dirt-box like the J. But I hoped. You have a good brain on you, Zael Effereti. If you’d stuck to scholam, trained maybe, got a decent trade. You could have contributed. Made a life for yourself, against all those odds. But I guess the easy option was always going to suck you in.’

Kys suddenly, oddly, felt rather protective. Zael looked like he was going to cry.

‘Zael didn’t take any easy option, doctor,’ she said quietly.

‘Yeah, that’s the real truth, isn’t it?’ the medicae said. ‘The life you people choose, it looks easy. A few risks, a fast fortune. But it’s never easy in the end.’

Kys caught Zael’s eye and they both started laughing.

‘I say something funny?’ Belknap asked.

‘Hysterical,’ said Kys. ‘Now tell me. Why did you quit the community practice?’

Belknap’s compelling blue eyes stared straight up at her. ‘I didn’t. You want to know? Okay. I was disbarred. The Departamento Medicae struck me off and stripped me of my practice. They took away my credentials because I was found guilty of serious malpractice. Okay?’

+Throne, Zael! You brought me to him? We need a medicae, not an incompetent !+

+Ask him why+

+What?+

+Ask the doc why he was struck off.+

‘Why?’ asked Kys.

‘I said. Malpractice. Serious professional misconduct contrary to my oath as a Medicae Imperialis.’

Kys shook her head, reached into her pocket and threw a handful of change at Belknap. ‘Next stop, get off. Find your own way back. I’m sorry

to have inconvenienced you. We'll find someone else. Someone competent.'

Zael got up. 'Tell her!' he cried. 'Tell her the reason, doc!'

Belknap glanced at him. 'It doesn't matter, Zael.'

'Tell her!'

'It's my business.'

Zael turned to Kys. 'They disbarred him for fraud! It was a cash thing! He was only trying to... for Throne's sake, doc, explain it to her! I don't know how to describe it!'

Belknap breathed in deeply. 'My community practice had a budget. It was nothing like enough. You've seen the way it is down in the J. I could barely cope. Malnutrition, low-grade pollution disorders, addiction, chronic disease. People were dying – really, actually dying, I mean – because I couldn't afford the treatments for everyone. So I tried to work the system. I filed false subsist vouchers, claimed for practice expenses that didn't exist, defrauded the welfare system, just so I could bulk up my budget and afford the things I needed. The things my patients needed. The Administratum caught me, fair and square. Tore up my licence, kicked me out and told me I was lucky not to get a custodial.'

'See?' said Zael to Kys.

'So you just practise now anyway?' Kys asked. 'As a rogue medicae?'

'Listen, mamzel friend-of-Zael's. The formal infirmaries automatically deny treatment to any clan members injured in street clashes. Any drug addicts. Any persons who've lost their subsist code. Any child who doesn't present with a registered parent or guardian. The Administratum, by its own figures, recommends there should be one practising medicae for every five thousand citizens of any Imperial city. You know what the split is here in Petropolis? One medic for every hundred thousand habbers. A hundred thousand, so help me! You think the God-Emperor of Mankind is happy that's the way it is here? I'm just trying to even down the stats!'

The train rocked. The lights went on and off again quickly. The train was pulling into a sub-stop. Belknap collected up the scattered change.

‘Good luck,’ he said. ‘Zael. It might be way too late, but be a good boy, all right?’

The train shuddered to a halt. The auto-hatches opened.

Belknap got up, but Patience was right in front of him. ‘My name’s Patience Kys,’ she said.

‘Patrik Belknap,’ he replied.

‘Isn’t that *Medicae* Patrik Belknap?’ she asked.

They looked at each other for a long moment.

‘Sit down, sir,’ she said. ‘You’ll do.’

He sat. ‘Patience Kys, eh? I look forward to finding out your real name.’

‘Don’t hold your breath,’ she replied.

The hatches slipped closed and the train began to pull away.



NINE

ACROSS THE HIVE, out where Formal Q met the bay, the occulting lighthouse was blinking into the night. It was one of the twenty-nine station lighthouses that warded the curved seaboard of Petropolis.

The private flier swung down out of the sky, through the squalling rain. It landed on its eight jointed legs in the centre of the stone dock, and then, wings cased, walked itself over until its body hatch was under the rainguard awning.

The entrance was lit with fluttering candles and glow-globes. Magus-clancular Lezzard and about forty of the Fraternity's seers stood in the wind, waiting.

The body hatch opened, three figures dismounted and strode, side by side, towards the doorway.

Orfeo Culzean, business-like in a blue suit, flanked to his right by Leyla Slade, dressed in dark red. Her right hand was poised on the butt of the handgun holstered in the small of her back, and she scanned left and right, watching for movements out amongst the dark and the rain-blurred lights of the vehicle.

At Culzean's left walked Saul Keener, the notorious unsanctioned psyker. He had prospered over the years by offering his skills via Petropolis's black market, and he was always in demand. He was a short, dumpling of a man. His fine clothes spoke of his wealth and his build positively screamed of the obscene high living his art had afforded him. Keener displayed the symptoms of an obsessive-compulsive. He was constantly rubbing his beringed, sausage fingers together, and he had a great many tics and quivers that flapped his round, jowly face.

Keener held the trigger-orb in his fat hands. He'd had it close to him for several hours, so as to build a sympatico with the incunabula.

'We look upon you, Orfeo,' Magus-clancular Lezzard said.

'Magus-clancular, thank you for this greeting. Thank you to the Fraternity for making us welcome here.' Culzean's molten voice somehow cut through the sound of the rain and the flier's panting jet-pods.

'Enter,' Lezzard said. He turned, his exo-skeleton hissing in step with Culzean. Slade and the psyker came behind, trailed by the body of the fraters.

'Everything's prepared?' Culzean asked as they walked down the entrance hall of the old lighthouse.

'Everything, to your requirements. It's all prepared.'

'The device I sent you? It's safe?'

'Perfectly safe, Orfeo.'

They came out into the basement chamber of the lighthouse, a drum of a room, formed from local stock brick and dripping from the sea. The correct number of tapers – three thousand, one hundred and nine – were lit about the place. The device sat in the centre of the floor, silent, surrounded by the scribings. The marks on the stone floor formed a perfect pentagrammic ward.

They had been made with bone ash; or at least Culzean hoped so, or the night would come to a very sudden, very messy end.

Inside the outer scribings, the cages of payment waited. The poor human vermin within the iron boxes mewled and scratched.

'Locals?' asked Culzean.

'Mostly,' said Lezzard. 'But some of the fraters too. Those who have suffered the Unholy Macula and who are no use to us as seers.'

'Anything you need to update me on? Anything new? New determiners? Has the Fraternity's meniscus revealed any changes?'

'Some,' Lezzard gurgled. He nodded to Stefoy, and the seer handed Culzean a clump of papers on which recent seeings had been scribbled.

‘No. Not important. No,’ Culzean said, sorting through them and crumpling some to throw aside. ‘This, interesting. A change in the clouding, here, just an hour or two ago. Suddenly, the prospect is more likely. Why?’

‘We have not yet fathomed it,’ replied Arthous. ‘But we are pleased.’

‘Curious,’ Culzean continued to stare at the scrap of paper. ‘There is a name here. What is it?’

Leyla Slade leaned over and looked. ‘Belknap, sir,’ she said.

‘Belknap. Fascinating,’ Orfeo Culzean threw the crumpled paper away and looked at the next. ‘Now this...’ he began.

‘We were pleased by that reading,’ Lezzard said. ‘It supports your instinct. That man, high-born and powerful though he might be, is the key at this time. The most potent determiner. If he continues in his path, the prospect will fail.’

‘So nice to be vindicated,’ Culzean grinned. ‘Saul, would you like to take your place and we can get started. I sense a scratchy impatience within the device. Magus-clancular? Withdraw your fraters.’

Lezzard turned and ushered his followers back, until they were lost in the darkness of the basement, behind the candles. Culzean could see their augmetic eyes glowing in the gloom like a gang of cyclopes.

‘Leyla?’ Culzean said over his shoulder. ‘Be ready. Shoot anything that doesn’t obey.’

The woman nodded and drew out her Hostec Livery 50. She slid out the clip of standard rounds and slotted in a magazine of specially prepared loads. Then she slunked the slide.

‘Master Keener?’ Culzean said. ‘Go to work.’

Saul Keener raised the trigger-orb and, as he had been instructed, started to slide reality with his mind. It grew cold in the basement of the occulting lighthouse.

The device in the centre of the floor began to vibrate. It was a small pyramid, wrought in gold and silver. It started to rock and vibrate, as if a charge were passing through it.

Keener pressed on, turning the orb in his hands. The device continued to quiver.

‘I sense him now,’ Keener muttered. ‘Oh, yes. He’s coming to my bidding. Oh, yes, here...’

The three thousand, one hundred and nine candle flames flared and grew taller. The light spread. The little golden pyramid shook again, and then unfolded.

It didn’t unleash a figure. It bent and deformed to create one. The folding golden sides twisted and extended, doming a shape that coalesced out of a mist that spilled from the opening centre of the pyramid. A crouched, hunched figure formed, head down, curled. The golden tracery of the device wrapped itself up and down the figure’s limbs, creating armour, an encasing suit, a crested helmet.

The Brass Thief rose to its feet. Smoke poured off it, gusted from its awakening. It was thin, wrapped in segmented plates of gold and brass, faceless but for eyeslits in the high-crested helm.

‘The incunabula is awake,’ Keener whispered.

‘Tell it to feast,’ Culzean said.

Keener spoke with his mind, via the orb, and the golden figure stepped forward. Warp-smoke dribbled off its golden limbs. It raised its hands and, with a wet click, extended the rhyming swords.

It took a step towards the nearest cage. The sacrifices within saw it coming and squealed.

It lashed through the bars, its blades meeting flesh, and began to feed.

Six minutes later, with the cages reduced to buckled frames full of fuming bones, the incunabula clacked to the edge of the scribing and folded its rhyming swords.

‘It’s ready,’ Keener said, rubbing frantically at his hands. ‘It’s really ready. It’s fed and it’s yearning to know what is next. It wants to know why you’ve woken it.’

Culzean nodded. He looked round at Leyla Slade, who had been training her handgun on the incunabula for the last five minutes.

‘Put that away, Ley,’ Culzean said.

He took a step forward until just the outer line of scribing separated him from the incunabula.

‘Hello,’ Culzean said softly. ‘Remember me? Of course you do. I’m going to show you a name. You know what to do then.’

Culzean held up one of the scraps of paper. ‘You see? Read it right. Understand?’

The Brass Thief gently nodded its crested helm.

‘That name is Jader Trice,’ said Culzean. ‘Do your worst.’

The Brass Thief rocked and vast metal wings articulated out of its back. The wings flapped and it ascended, turning out of the scribed circle, out of the lighthouse. Towards the city.



TEN

THE SPEECH, WHICH had been elegantly crafted and masterfully delivered, came to an end, and the audience rose to its feet, applauding wildly. The furious approval shook the majestic state banqueting hall, the most regal chamber of the diplomatic palace in Formal A.

At the head of the fan of crowded tables, the speaker waved his hand and accepted the applause graciously, smiling at the cheers he had raised from the assembled highborn dignitaries of the Manufactory Guild. The guild was one of the most influential bodies in the subsector, representing both state and private business interests, and its leaders were men and women of great learning, wit and commercial acumen.

And also fools, thought Jader Trice, if they could be brought to their feet in jubilation by meaningless phrases such as ‘genuine market prosperity’, ‘financial upturn’ and ‘glorious futures for our children’s generation’ all strung together and said out loud. Of course, it was the way he had said them.

The guild mistress, Sephone Halwah, got up from her seat beside Trice, shook his hand, and gestured broadly to calm the assembly. The uproar slowly died away.

Halwah was a tall, poised woman in her one-seventies, who looked a youthful forty-something thanks to the expensive juvenat treatments she had enjoyed. Her hair, the colour of spun gold, was contained in a crispinette of white ribbon behind her round, ermine hat and barrette, and her long gown, covered by the ornately embroidered mantle of her office, was made of ice-white silk and frieze. She raised her goblet. Her gown had long, ballooning sleeves tied with golden thread around her cuffs. Wise, thought Trice, to choose a cut that conceals your elbows, my mistress. It

was always the elbows that gave away a woman's true age, no matter how strenuous the juvenat work.

'My guild fellows,' she said. 'I would ask you to join me as I pledge a heartfelt thanks to the honoured speaker at our annual dinner, the first provost of the Ministry of Subsector Trade, Sire Jader Trice.'

More applause, and a general, loud toasting as the cups were raised. Almost at once, music struck up from the gallery and attendants hurried forward to clear the tables. Some guests resumed their seats, others moved forward into the open floor space to begin the stately dances.

'Fine words, provost,' the guild mistress said as she sat down next to Trice. 'You know how to stir an assembly.'

'If only you knew,' Trice murmured.

'I'm sorry?' she said, leaning forward. 'The music is rather loud.'

'I said I am gratified, mistress.'

Halwah turned to speak with a guild senior who had approached. Trice sat for a moment, toying with his goblet, staring at the dancers, the hurrying servants, the clusters of guests in loose conversation. Jader Trice was a slender, ageless man with a distinguished beard on his chin and long, black hair that he had tied back for the evening. He had unmatched eyes, one sea-blue, the other ember-brown. He wore heavy brocade robes of gold and sarry over a long gown of silver willowthread. His amulet of office hung around his neck on weighty gold links. Sharp-minded, silk-tongued, he was one of the most effective and assured political operators in the Angelus sub. Trice recognised no superior except the lord governor subsector himself, and the ministry he controlled had been established by Barazan when he had come to office in 400.

Trice was a little weary. The day had been long and spoiled by an unexpected turn of events. He also had little relish of functions such as the guild banquet, but these were important people and he wanted to keep them on his side.

+My lord.+

Trice looked up. Right across the busy hall, two hundred metres away, a figure had appeared, and was standing in the grand doorway, half hidden by the ormolu frame.

+I need a word.+

Trice nodded slightly, so only the figure would notice. He rose to his feet.

‘Not going, surely? You promised me a spin,’ Halwah said, turning to look at him. Several guildsmen around them also urged him to stay.

Trice smiled his most winning smile. ‘Of course not, my friends. But you know my job never stops. Word is, the value of the crown... which we all worship as the *true* master of mankind, do we not?’

The guilders roared at his joke.

‘The value of the crown in the rimward market is still declining. I have to put in a call to the chief treasurer on Caxton before the market closes. Once that onerous duty is done... the chief treasurer does so enjoy the sound of his own voice amplified by astropath...’

More laughter.

‘...I will return. Between you and me, honoured friends, it’s jitters. Our Lord Barazan came to office three years ago, and the honeymoon period is over. Investors and some trade amalgams in the rim are getting edgy that the liberal reforms our lord promised at inauguration are slow to be fulfilled. What is it I always say?’

‘These things take time!’ a senior guildster nearby called.

‘Precisely, Sire Onriss,’ Trice smiled as the laughter buffeted once again. ‘So excuse me while I take a moment to dampen their nerves. You’ll appreciate it on the morrow when you slate-read your trading portfolios. As for you, dear Mistress Halwah, I swear on my mother’s pristine honour that I will return in no more than fifteen minutes. Then you will experience a volta more sublime than your wildest dreams.’

Yet more laughter, led by the exaggeratedly demure Halwah. Trice strode from the table.

Immediately, four waiting house guards from the Gubernatorial Service closed around him: bullish men in dark blue leather and ceramite, visors

down, hellguns mag-clamped to their chest plates. As a senior official of the subsector Administratum, Trice enjoyed all the protection benefits of the lord governor himself.

Escorted, he walked down the length of the banquet hall and out into the crystal-lit grand processional. The chatter and music of the feast dimmed behind him.

The figure was waiting for him up ahead beside the door of a privacy suite. Servants dashed past.

‘Wait here,’ Trice ordered his house guard squad, and went into the suite with the waiting figure.

The suite was a series of luxurious meeting rooms, designed to be completely surveillance-opaque, so that the senior ambassadors of the diplomatic department could conduct conversations in the strictest secrecy.

As soon as he was inside, the door closed. Trice felt the vibration hum of audio-bouncers, vox-inhibitors and psy-blunt systems activating and overlapping.

Trice walked over to a gilt cabinet and poured himself a large amasec.

‘Anything for you, Toros?’

Toros Revoke shook his head politely. Revoke was wearing a subtle, dark suit, and his hands were gloved. He was as much a part of Trice’s protection as the armed house guards waiting outside. But nothing like so official. Toros Revoke was a senior lieutenant of an unofficial body known as the Secretists.

‘Well, that’s another evening of my life I’m never getting back,’ Trice said, sipping his amasec and sitting down on an upholstered tub chair. He crossed his legs, folding the heavy gown across his knees for comfort. ‘They’re all idiots, you realise? Every last jack one of them. Fools in love with profit. I could have told them I shat stools of solid gold and they’d have asked me to show them how.’

‘The public face,’ Revoke said.

Trice nodded. 'The public face. So tell me about your day. Tell me something to make me happy.'

'Well...'

'You've got bad news, haven't you, Toros?'

'Not at all. Curious news, perhaps. I'll start with the good. Nine more private masses went ahead tonight, all as decreed, all in temples along the defined axes.'

'I heard there was trouble the other night. Where was it?'

'The chapel at Rudiment and Pass-on-over. The usual story. A poor nobody who shouldn't have been there wandered in on the service.'

'Did he see anything?' Trice asked, swirling the dark liquor in his glass.

'Oh, plenty. Fortunately, I was there to secret the mass. I'd brought along Monicker and Drax too.'

'How is Monicker? Still not sure who she is?'

'She's a dissembler. It goes with the territory. We turfed the man out, and saw to him.'

'Cleanly?'

'The Unkindness stripped him bare.'

Trice smiled. 'I do so love it when this city looks after its own secrets.'

Revoke crossed the room and sat down in a plush seat opposite Trice. 'I understand today has been eventful. I heard about the business at the sacristy. Do you need my people to cover that?'

Trice shook his head. 'No, it's in hand. Could be a blessing, actually. It may transpire that we've been this-locating the true centre all this time. There is a secrecy issue. Some strand of the Magistratum has got it already. But I've put wheels in motion. So now, this curious news of yours?'

'Akunin wants an audience with you. Pretty much demands it.'

Trice lit a lho-stick from the casket on the table beside his chair. 'Shipmaster Akunin knows it doesn't work that way. No direct contact between me and the contractees.'

‘Even so...’

‘Even so, screw him. What does he want to see me about?’

Revoke leaned forward. ‘Earlier tonight, a premises ran by the cartel’s chosen banker was raided. Burned down. A lot of deaths.’

‘Then the cartel’s a fool for using a financier who ran so close to the wind. Tchaikov was black market. She had any number of enemies. It’s not our concern where they stash the money we pay them. Die too, did she?’

Revoke nodded. ‘It appears so. I have my team sifting the wreckage right now. A gang dispute, I think. One of her rivals in the underworld.’

‘So... why is Akunin asking for me?’

‘He thinks it’s more than that. He believes it could be the work of someone who is trying to break our programme open.’

Trice frowned. He set his glass down and took a long draw from the smouldering lho-stick. ‘Is that possible?’

‘I don’t believe so,’ Revoke replied. ‘There was one potential troublemaker, but you sent him to his doom yourself.’

‘I did. Tell Akunin to get over it and use a more reliable money-launderer. But keep an eye on what you turn up. I don’t want us to be caught out. Was that all?’

Revoke rose. ‘Yes, lord. Thank you.’

Trice stubbed out his stick. ‘Thank you. Back to the party, I suppose.’

Revoke held the door open for his master, and Trice stepped out of the suite. The waiting Gubernatorial servicemen closed around the first provost to lead him back down the processional to the banquet hall.

An eight-metre square skylight above them exploded in a blizzard of glass debris. Looking up in the storm of falling shards, reaching for their weapons, the servicemen got one brief glimpse of the attacker.

The paired rhyming swords took off two heads and ripped open the torsos of the other two.

Jader Trice turned as the Brass Thief landed behind him. Glass fragments were raining down from the window, and the ripped bodies of the four

servicemen were still falling, blood sheeting from their awful wounds.

Crested helm bowed, its arms like gold-sleeved pistons, the Brass Thief struck its rhyming swords at Jader Trice.

Trice gawped in dread as the razor-edged blades swung at him simultaneously. But he was a quick-witted man. He had already activated the displacer field built into his amulet of office.

Jader Trice vanished in an oily smudge of air, and reappeared ten metres away down the processional. The incunabula's blades sliced through empty space.

It paused, lifting its golden, crested helm, reacquired its quarry, and bounded forward.

Alarms were suddenly ringing. Half a dozen armed Magistratum officers spilled out into the long hallway and found themselves between the chief provost and the golden daemon.

The incunabula didn't break stride. It had ploughed through them before they had even realised what was going on. Two more armoured heads were carved in half, then the daemon speared its blades into two chests, somersaulted, and brought the rhyming swords down in scything strokes that cleft the last two from their shoulders to their navels. One of the final pair opened fire, but it was just a nerve spasm. Hellgun shots whickered up the processional wall as the man collapsed.

'Avast thee!' Trice yelled at the oncoming monster, his hands forming a hexagrammic sign in its face.

The incunabula recoiled for a moment, then spun its blades and pounced at the chief provost.

Auto-fire of tremendous force blew it out of the air before it could reach him. It crashed sideways into the wall, crazed the stone facing, and hit the ground.

Before it could rise, a second blaze of auto-fire smacked into it, tumbling it away across the marble floor. By now, the music in the hall had broken off and hundreds of voices were rising in loud panic.

Toros Revoke strode towards the crumbled incunabula, keeping the hellgun he had snatched from one of the butchered house guards raised and aimed. It wasn't dead. He could see that. It had soaked up a lot of punishment, but still it wasn't dead. Revoke started firing again, ripping the creature backwards.

Then the powerclip was out, the weapon dead, and the Brass Thief was surging up at him, renewed, blades whirring. The first chop sheared the hellgun in half.

Revoke flicked aside like a dancer, turning a one-handed spring that took him clear. The Thief jerked its golden head round, cocked on one side, as if curious. It swung murderously for Revoke again, and again he evaded, this time with a rapid backwards handspring.

The Brass Thief made an odd, pulsing sound. It was laughing in delight to have found an opponent who could even begin to trouble it.

It engaged Revoke again. This time there was no holding back. The dark-suited man and the golden daemon turned and spun and dodged and struck and ducked and blocked, inhuman blurs, faster than the eye could follow.

SAUL KEENER SHUDDERED slightly and groaned. The sound was disturbingly loud in the close silence of the lighthouse basement.

‘What’s the matter with him?’ Leyla Slade asked.

Orfeo Culzean didn't reply. The lights of the fraters' intently staring eyes filled the darkness around them.

‘Saul?’ Culzean said softly. ‘Let me look,’ He reached out his own right hand and touched its fingertips to the trigger orb. He pursed his lips as he began to share the psy-cast images.

‘I see the Thief,’ he said. ‘It’s found Trice. I see the chief provost, fleeing down a great hallway. But there’s someone in the way. A man. He’s preventing the Thief from reaching Trice.’

‘How?’ Leyla Slade asked.

‘He...’ Culzean began, uncertainly. ‘He is fighting with it. He seems to be unarmed, but he has closed with it. He... Oh, so fast! He’s matching it

move for move, reading every cut it tries to make, evading. The speed, the skill is... phenomenal.'

'No one can do that,' said Leyla Slade. 'Not against the incunabula. It's not possible.'

'It seems it is. I'm seeing it,' said Culzean. 'I knew Trice would employ seriously capable protectors, but this a revelation. The movements are so fluid, so fast, I can scarcely track them. But it won't last.'

'You're sure?' asked the magus-clancular.

'The Thief never tires. The man will. And he is, as I said, unarmed. All he can do is protect himself.'

INSTINCT TOLD REVOKE he was just two, maybe three, strokes from running out of luck. He couldn't sustain this pace of combat much more than a few seconds longer. He sidestepped the Thief and yelled an un-word in desperation.

The force of the un-word smashed the incunabula back fifty metres. It hit the processional's side wall, cratering it, and fell to the floor.

'WHAT... WHAT WAS that?' Saul Keener gasped.

'I don't know,' Culzean snapped. 'Hold your concentration, damn it!'

REVOKE SPRINTED DOWN the hall and caught up with Trice. He started to hurry his master towards the nearest exit. 'Securitas!' he yelled into his vox. 'Securitas to the main processional! Code black!'

'What was it?' Trice asked, his eyes wide with shock.

'Not was, *is*. Still. Come on!' Almost dragging Trice, Revoke reached the stairwell that led down to the palace's wide courtyard. Behind him, the incunabula stirred and got up. It flew after its prey, down the hall, down the staircase, into the courtyard.

And halted. The raised weapons of sixty palace troopers faced it.

The men opened fire.

The vast barrage blew the stone doorway apart, shattered the lintel and punched deep shot-craters in the stones of the wall. The night lit up with a dazzling storm of energy bolts.

The incunabula came out of that fire, las-rounds bouncing like raindrops off the primaevally-forged metal of its sheathing armour. The rhyming swords glowed red with heat as they swung.

A guard lost his face in a burst of blood. Another went over, headless. A third staggered back, missing his left arm; a fourth was savagely deprived of most of his rifle and both the hands that had been clutching it. Still the shots rained as the Brass Thief hacked into their ranks. Two men toppled slackly, their waists clean-severed. A decapitation. A trooper fell to his knees, trying to hold his stomach in. Another fell on his back, his sternum snapped through. The troopers kept shooting, though they were now backing away, splashing through the pooling blood that was starting to cover the flagstones. An arm was struck off, a leg at the knee. A man flew backwards through the air, cut in two, and crunched down onto the roof of a parked transport, bursting out the windows. A trooper sank onto his side, clutching his visor. Another dragged himself across the slippery paving, trying to find his legs.

There was an especially vivid flash of light. A specialist trooper team hefting a plasma cannon had begun to open fire. The Brass Thief lurched as it was hit, turned, and threw one of its rhyming swords at the weapon-team.

Tip-first, the whistling blade tore through the plasma weapon's breach and impaled the chief operator. Its power-pod ruptured, the plasma cannon exploded, incinerating the entire team in a boiling cloud of violet energy. The shockwave felled another dozen men nearby. A fragment of razor-sharp debris from the cannon's focus ring zinged out and sliced through the neck of a guard officer.

CULZEAN SMILED. 'OH, tell him to bring that, Saul. For my collection.'

THE REMAINING TROOPERS had broken in terror and were running for their lives. The blazing wreck of the exploded cannon formed a white-hot pyre at the heart of the courtyard, the leaping flames reflected in the oil-dark lake of blood. Bodies and body parts lay everywhere. Nearly forty men of the palace elite, butchered.

The Brass Thief stepped forward, the firelight glinting off its blood-flecked armour. It bent down and picked up the piece of focus ring and hooked it around its belt. Then it held out its empty hand and the rhyming sword it had thrown flew back into its grasp, plucked from the burning corpse.

On the far side of the courtyard, Revoke pushed Trice behind him, and turned to face the oncoming spectre of destruction.

‘Toros, old friend,’ Trice said. ‘Please, don’t let it get me.’

Revoke tried to reply, but his mouth was bleeding from the un-word he had used to knock the daemon down in the processional. That had been the only thing that had worked.

Though it hurt and tore his throat, Revoke howled another un-word. The advancing incunabula rocked back as if it had been hit in the chest by a tank round.

Revoke could smell psychic powers suddenly. The trace had probably been there all along, but he’d been too busy to taste it. He reached out with his telepathy, not at the approaching daemon – that would have been futile – but at the distant mind that guided it.

‘Toros!’ Jader Trice cried out. The Brass Thief was powering forward. Two more un-words, agonisingly voiced, slapped it back. Revoke’s real counterattack was somewhere else. As he shouted the monster down, his mind was soaring elsewhere, into the dark, into the depths of the city.

There. There. There! Some twitching lunk called Keener.

‘SAUL?’ CULZEAN SAID.

‘Mhhh...’ Keener replied.

‘Saul, disengage now. Right now.’

Orfeo Culzean tore his hand away from the orb to break contact. He had felt what was coming. A vengeful telepathic fury of hideous force struck Saul Keener like a hammer blow. He stroked out at once, his brain pulped. His eyes burst into flames.

With a violent, twitching fit, he toppled over, dead.

LOOSED, UNGUIDED SUDDENLY, the incunabula staggered, off-balance. It glared around the courtyard for a moment, the firelight dancing off its crested mask.

Then it mewed pitifully, writhed and flew off into the night.

Revoke turned and stared at his master. A huge tumult of panic and confusion rang from the palace behind them.

‘Dear gods without name,’ Jader Trice murmured. ‘All that I owe you up to now, Toros, is nothing. I owe you my life.’

Blood was pouring from Toros Revoke’s mouth. His lips were split. He spat out gore onto the flagstones, and a shattered tooth came out with it.

‘Just doing my job... lord,’ he lisped.

ORFEO CULZEAN CAUGHT the trigger-orb as it fell from Keener’s collapsing body. It was smoky-hot.

‘Shit,’ said Leyla Slade.

‘Indeed,’ Culzean said. He seemed almost amused.

‘What happened?’ Lezzard asked.

‘They bested us,’ Culzean said. ‘I offer my apologies, magus-clancular. I underestimated their resources.’

‘We have... failed?’ Arthous asked.

‘Tonight, yes, most probably. I am an expeditor, Frater Arthous. You employ me for my skills and my experience. Not only because I know what to do, but because I know what else to do when things don’t go according to plan. This is just a setback. I’ll ponder for a while, and decide upon the next best course of action.’

‘A setback?’ Arthous seemed contemptuous.

‘Perhaps not even that,’ Culzean said. ‘Have the fraters look to their mirrors. Examine the prospect and its determiners over the next day or so. It’s possible that even without killing the chief provost, we might have derailed his involvement favourably.’

‘What of your servant?’ Stefoy asked.

‘It is cut loose, wild. It will return here in a few hours and shut itself down. Make sure it’s well fed, or it won’t be willing to serve us the next time we employ it. And we will need another psyker. Someone very able. I’d like the Fraternity to procure one this time, preferably someone from off-world. Bring them here.’

‘Of course,’ said Lezzard. ‘Anything else, Orfeo?’

‘Give me time to think, magus.’

‘Yes, but the prospect—’

‘The prospect is the only thing that concerns me, magus-clancular. One hundred per cent, I will make it happen.’

Orfeo Culzean turned and walked up out of the basement, Leyla Slade at his side.

‘I think we should leave,’ she whispered.

‘We are leaving, Ley.’

‘I mean the planet. This is turning into a lousy deal. The Fraternity might turn nasty if we don’t deliver.’

‘We will deliver. This is exactly why I choose to be in this game. It’s so seldom a real challenge arises. This is the one, Ley. The expedition that will make my name immortal. Can’t you feel it?’

‘I feel something. Those frigging one-eyes glaring at us. I say we make our excuses and quit.’

‘Leyla Slade, that’s hardly the backbone I hired you for.’

She shrugged.

‘I’m hungry,’ Culzean said. ‘I need a decent meal and some distraction. Is it too late for the last show at the Carnivora?’

‘I’ll check.’

‘Tomorrow, I want a day without interruption. And I need you to look out some books for me, some old almanacs from my library. Anything you can find on the subject of Enuncia.’

‘Yeah? What’s that?’

‘No one really knows any more. Just a memory of a myth. But that man tonight, the one who kept our Thief at bay. I’d stake my professional reputation on the fact that he was using it.’



ELEVEN

‘SO HOW DID this happen?’ Belknap asked, slowly packing the wound with sterile gauze and tissue-cleaner.

‘I cut myself shaving,’ said Harlon Nayl.

‘Right,’ said Belknap. ‘There was I thinking this was a gross wound caused by a side-blown round on the tumble.’

Nayl sat, stripped to the waist, on a wooden stool in the spartan kitchen of Miserimus House. The doctor’s practice bag was open on the table and the contents spread out. Kys stood in the doorway, watching, Zael at her side. It was almost an hour past middle night, and the city outside was deathly quiet.

‘You know a lot about gunshot wounds, do you?’ Nayl said.

‘I know a lot about a lot, mister. There. Done. Keep it clean and I’ll check it in a day or two.’

Belknap looked at Kys. ‘Two, you said.’

‘The other one’s upstairs.’

‘All right, then. Show me. And, just so we’re clear, I’m not happy about this. Slaphead here is moody-class muscle, and you, I don’t know what you are.’

‘I can hear you,’ Nayl said.

‘I don’t care,’ Belknap replied. ‘I’m doing this for Zael, okay? And in return, I’d like you people to do something for me.’

‘What?’ asked Kys.

‘Let him go. Cut him loose. Give him a few hundred crowns... your type probably has that in change... send him on his way. Give him a chance, I mean, before this gang-life of yours swallows him up.’

‘Our type?’ Nayl said.

‘Shut up, Harlon,’ Kys warned. She looked at the doctor. ‘This is not what you think.’

‘It really isn’t,’ Zael put in.

‘A rented house, a gunshot wound, serious muscle, the need for a back-street sawbones. I’m not stupid, lady. This is connected syndicate stuff. You’re in something up to your ears. Tell me I’m wrong.’

‘You’re not wrong,’ Kys submitted. ‘We’re up to our ears.’

‘Show me the other one,’ Belknap said.

They went upstairs.

+Patience?+

+Yes, Gideon?+

+We appreciate this medicae’s help, but can he be trusted?+

+Zael says he can.+

+The question stands.+

+All right. Call me a woman of simple instincts, but I reckon if you cut the doctor through the middle, you’d find the word “trust” written right through him.+

+Let’s hope I don’t have to ask you to do that.+

Kys led Belknap down the upper hallway, Zael trailing behind them.

‘How did you sucker him in?’ Belknap asked her.

‘Zael? Actually, we brought him along for his own good.’

‘Your kind always says that.’

‘Sometime soon,’ Kys said sweetly, ‘you and I are going to have to have a little talk about what you mean by that phrase.’ She opened the door to Kara’s bedroom.

Kara lay on the little cot, twitching and pale in her fever-sleep. The bandages Nayl had wrapped around her stomach were leaking blood.

‘Oh... Throne,’ Belknap whispered. ‘What the hell’s this now?’

He sat down beside Kara and undid the bandage.

‘Blade wound... hell!’ he jerked back as droplets of blood billowed out of the cut in Kara’s belly. ‘God-Emperor, that’s not normal! What did this?’

‘It was something they called a vampire blade,’ Zael said. ‘They said it tasted her. The wound won’t close. Please, Doctor Belknap. Do something. Kara’s too nice a lady to die.’

‘I don’t even know...’ the doctor began. He rose to his feet and looked at Kys and the boy. ‘What is this? What the hell is this?’

I slid into the room, my chair hovering noiselessly. Belknap stared at me for a long moment.

‘My name is Gideon Ravenor, Doctor Belknap,’ I transponded. ‘These people, Zael included, are my associates. I thank you for the help you have offered us so far. I understand you are scared, and also admirably concerned for Zael Effereti’s welfare. I believe this might reassure you.’

I activated my chair’s display mechanism. The slot opened and the projector slid out, casting the hololithic image of my rosette.

It was not the regular red sigil. I had adopted the azure mark of Special Condition, the grave, winged skull.

Belknap recognised it all the same. ‘I... the Inquisition?’

‘I am an inquisitor, yes. Once of the Ordo Xenos Helican. Now in Special Condition operation here on Eustis Majoris.’

‘The Inquisition?’ Belknap repeated.

‘These are members of my team, doctor. We are here on a mission of the utmost gravity, and we are here in total secrecy. That’s what Special Condition means. We cannot contact the authorities for help. Not even medical help. That is why Patience and Zael came to find you.’

‘This... this is all too much...’ Belknap stammered.

‘Too much for you, doctor?’

‘As I understand it, an inquisitor carries with him the personal authority of the God-Emperor himself,’ Belknap said quietly, staring at me. ‘To disobey the orders of an Imperial inquisitor is to disobey the voice of the Golden Throne itself. Right?’

‘That about sums it up,’ I said.

‘Then I will not question you and I will do everything you ask me to,’ Belknap said simply.

‘Save Kara’s life,’ I said.

He turned to work. ‘I have a salve, a certain tincture. I can arrest the blood loss for a while. Then, if I can run some tests, I might be able to counter the damage. But, my resources... I’ll need a transfuser, of course...’

‘Whatever you need, doctor,’ I said. We have funds. Tell Patience or Zael what you want and they’ll get it for you.’

I swung my chair round and faced Kys.

+Your instinct was good.+

+I’m glad. I thought so, but...+

+Patience, I need to tell you something about Zael. Something Wystan found out tonight.+

+Crap, what’s the kid done now?+

+It’s not like that, Patience. It’s about... what he might do.+

+What do you mean?+

I was about to reply when the psy shockwave hit me. I was unprepared for the force of it, and it lurched me over. A huge psyclonic event had just boomed across the hive.

I left the shell of my chair at once and went bodiless into the night above the house. I could hear Kys’s desperate calls echoing below me.

+Gideon? Gideon?+

+I’m fine. Check the house security.+

I rose up, free, into the night sky, the vast city blazing below me. Traceries of bright psi-fire burned over the inner formals. Taking the aether form of a salmon, I swam down towards them and saw— Throne! The blood. The butchery. The dismemberment. The palace yard filled with dead, fire boiling from a ruined weapon. This was the diplomatic palace in Formal A, the heart of subsector power. Wholesale carnage had happened here.

I read the dying fibre-traces of a daemon in the air. It was loose, somewhere, a being so powerful I didn't want to find it. Something primeval, an atavistic throwback to the pre-formed ages of Chaos, an incunabula.

And there, hurrying for cover, that was certainly the chief provost, Jader Trice, supported by another man in a dark suit. Attendants were rushing to them, medical teams spilling out into the horror of the courtyard. Alarm bells.

What in the name of the God-Emperor had just hap—

The man in the dark suit looked round. He smelled me. He was a psyker – a very, very powerful psyker – and he had caught the scent of me on the wind.

I couldn't allow that. I recoiled at once, pulling back. His mind snaked up after me.

‘Wystan?’

Wystan Frauka put down his slate and deactivated his limiter.

The world went dark. Somewhere, invisibly, the hunting mind of the man in the dark suit roamed on, thwarted.

‘Ravenor?’ Kys asked.

‘Get Thonius working. Get him to tap into the news vox and the Ministry-ciphers. Something just happened down at the diplomatic palace, and I want to know what it was. *Now.*’



TWELVE

EVEN AS IT began, Maud Plyton decided it was going to be one of *those* days. She knew why, of course. The night before, the public data services had carried special announcements informing all hive citizens of a ‘grave incident’ at the diplomatic palace. They didn’t specify what, but the PDF had gone to stand to, and entry to the hive-heart formals was likely to be restricted, so it had to be something pretty big.

Plyton lived in the spare room of her elderly uncle’s town-hab in Formal E, and usually travelled to work on the rail transit. She’d put in a call to the department to find out what was going on, but all she’d got had been a recorded vox message advising staff to expect delays on the transit network.

So she’d borrowed her uncle’s transport and driven in to work instead. Uncle Valeryn was getting on, and pretty much housebound. He’d been a musician in his day, though mental infirmity meant the clavichord no longer sang under his fingers. But he’d been successful enough to accumulate modest wealth, and afford a two-storey town-hab in an inner formal, and a private nurse.

Maud was his only living relative, and she’d come to live with him when she started her work with the Magistratum. Valeryn hadn’t really approved of his niece’s occupation, though nowadays he often couldn’t remember what it was she did.

‘Can I borrow the Bergman, Uncle Vally?’ she’d asked that morning, drinking a caff over the sink, clad in her full uniform. It was early still, dark outside, but her uncle had been up for hours, sitting at the spinet as if wondering what the ebony keys were meant to do.

He hadn't driven the Bergman since '89, when the Administratum had cancelled his permit on health grounds. But he kept it garaged in the private bunkers under the hab block, and once in a while allowed Plyton to drive him out to the Stairtown Parks on her day off.

'Are we going to the parks?' he asked.

'Not today, Vally. But I need to get into the A. Work. It's important.'

He looked at her, in her full Magistratum harness, body-plate, helmet hooked at her waist, and said, 'What is it you do, Maud?'

'I work, Vally. Can I use the Bergman?'

He shrugged. 'I suppose,' He turned away, and started to plink at middle C.

She let herself out quietly, taking the keys from the jar on the shelf above the hall heater.

The Bergman Amity Veluxe was a four-litre carbide coupe with slate-green bodywork and extravagant chrome. Plyton adored it, adored its leather and linseed smell, its rumbling under note. On her salary, even allowing for promotion, she'd never afford a private transporter like the Bergman herself. The story went her uncle had been given it as a gift by a conductor who had been brought to tears by the way Valeryn had played a particular work.

As she drove up through the expressways and interlinks of the inner formals, the traffic grew denser. Thick clouds of acid fog had draped the streets with a yellow mist. She saw rail transit stations closed and guarded, and PDF detachments manning unshrouded weapon emplacements on the buttresses of high stacks. The hive had armed itself.

Regular roadblocks hemmed in the choking traffic, Magistratum officers in rain-slickers checking permits and idents. Plyton began to wonder if she'd have been better off staying at home.

She began to wonder what the hell had happened at the diplomatic palace.

She risked a down-ramp, and used her knowledge of the sink-level street-grid to pull ahead of the blocked arterials. At Whiskane Circus, she took a surface ramp and tried to join the Formal A South Express.

Another impasse. A vast multitude of Administratum workers had attempted to meet the start of their shifts by walking in along the pavements and overpasses. Now the foot traffic was also bound up, as the Magistratum checked IDs and gradually let them into the inner formal walks a few at a time.

She waited patiently until the crawling line of traffic brought her up to a checkpoint.

An officer approached.

Plyton opened the cab window and flashed her warrant. ‘Special Crime Department. I’m trying to get to work.’

‘Not this way, marshal,’ the officer said. ‘Sorry. No road access to A along here.’

‘What do I do?’

The officer waved with his lumin baton in the fog. ‘Turn east. We’re allowing Magistratum personnel into the formal along Parsonage Avenue,’ He turned. ‘Magistratum! Let it through!’

Plyton yanked on the anchor-shaped wheel, and pulled through the gap he had indicated as other officers lifted aside a sawhorse barrier. Other traffic – omnibuses and private cargoes – hooted in disgust as they watched her slip through.

Plyton edged the Bergman along through packs of pedestrians slow to give way. Through the rain and the stroking wipers, she glimpsed a familiar face and thumped the horn.

Grim, weary faces turned to scowl at her.

She leaned out of her window. ‘Limbwall! Hey, Limbwall!’

In the crowd, the department’s skinny secretary officer, laden down with an armful of files, turned and saw her.

‘Get in!’

Perplexed, he clambered in the passenger side, and Plyton moved off through the crowd.

‘Morning,’ she said.

‘Is this yours?’ he asked, trying to wipe the sudden condensation off the fat lenses of his augmetic optics.

‘I borrowed it.’

‘Who from?’

‘My uncle.’

‘And he’s what? The playboy nephew of the lord governor sub?’

‘I know. Nice, isn’t it?’

‘Doesn’t even begin to cover it. Throne, what a morning! Like a fool, I tried to walk in. Rail was closed.’

‘You walked from Formal E?’

He looked at her. ‘I serve the aquila. What else was I supposed to do? I mean, what in the name of Terra happened here last night?’

‘I was hoping you could tell me that.’

Limbwall shrugged. ‘I don’t know much. I heard rumours that an attempt had been made on the chief provost’s life last night.’

‘Where? At the palace? Someone tried to kill Trice?’

‘That’s what I heard.’

‘From?’

‘People in the crowd.’

‘Not a great source, Limbwall. Stick to your clerking. No one’s crazy or powerful enough to try for Trice.’

Limbwall glanced out of the window. ‘You got a better explanation?’

She hadn’t. The clogging tides of pedestrians had thinned out now, and they were making better time through almost deserted streets and sink-routes that the barricades had closed off. Even so, they had to stop twice to allow unfriendly squads of PDF to check their authority.

‘You realise that we’re going to have to go all the way round the inner circle to get to mag central.’

Plyton nodded. ‘Better that than wait in a queue. Besides, this way we can stop in at the sacristy en route. I was going to have to go there this morning anyway. This saves me a trip. If you don’t mind.’

‘Not at all,’ Limbwall said. He was clearly enjoying his ride in the ornate roadster. ‘By the way, speaking of the sacristy case, I pulled that file for you.’

‘Yeah? From home?’

Limbwall blushed slightly. ‘Yes. Throne, please don’t tell Rickens. He’ll have my guts. I’ve enhanced the cogitator in my hab with department codes so I can keep up with the workload after hours. I’d never manage otherwise.’

‘Limbwall, you know that after hours is meant for recreation? A relaxed meal, a drink or two with friends, maybe even a relationship?’

‘If I didn’t take the work home, I’d never meet the deputy’s needs. Six hours, maybe seven, I work off-duty. Don’t tell me you never take work home.’

‘Well...’

‘Yeah. Since when did you have a relationship?’

Plyton scowled and said nothing.

Limbwall pulled a file from his armful. ‘Here. I processed it last night. Basic stuff, like you said.’

‘Early drawings? Templates? Street plans?’

‘Uh huh. Even records about the pioneer builders, pulled from the archives of Scholam Architectus. You ever hear of a man called Cadizky?’

‘Uh, there’s a Cadizky Square in Formal B.’

‘Named after. Theodor Cadizky. Thanks to him, the original city plan was what it was.’

‘Bio?’

‘It’s all in there.’

Plyton reached one hand off the wheel, took the folder Limbwall offered and stuffed it into the driver’s door pocket.

‘That’s great. Thanks. I think location is everything with the Aulsman case. I mean, that hidden roof. It’s got to be significant.’

‘Well, just be careful. That data took a lot of... digging out.’

‘Unauthorised? You mean... you stole it?’

‘Let’s just say I bypassed some meanings of the word “legitimate”, Emperor forgive me?’

Plyton grinned. She pulled them to a halt in Templum Square. The towering facade of the grand templum rose above them. The place was quiet in the rain. In front of the templum arch, a few Magistratum vehicles were parked. The place was still cordoned off.

‘Wait here,’ she told him. ‘I won’t be long. Just a few more pict for the record. I promised Rickens.’

She got out of the Bergman, and hurried into the cover of the portico. A pair of Magistratum officers approached.

‘Mamzel, you can’t—’

‘Relax. Special Crime,’ she grinned, flashing her shield. ‘This is my case.’

She hurried in through the vast dome of the templum, along the cloister and into the old sacristy. She was checking the magnetic charge of her hand picter when she realised a service-issue blunt was being aimed at her face.

‘That’s about far enough,’ a man’s voice said.

‘What the Throne?’ she began.

‘Really slow now. Hand me the picter.’

Plyton looked up, arms up. Two men stood before her, blocking the entrance. Both wore Magistratum armour, but armour which entirely lacked any ident or badge. Their visors were down. Their handguns were threatening.

‘Easy,’ she said. ‘I’m going to reach for my badge right now, okay?’

One of them nodded.

She hooked out her shield. ‘Maud Plyton, junior marshal. This is my case.’

One of the men took her warrant, studied it, then tossed it back to her. ‘Not any more,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Interior Cases is taking over, marshal. Walk away.’

‘Wait a minute...’

‘Leave. Now,’ the other said. ‘This belongs to Interior Cases now.’

‘Why?’

‘We don’t have to tell you anything,’ said the first officer. ‘Report back to your department.’

‘You have to tell me one thing,’ Plyton stated.

‘Yeah? What?’

‘Magistratum dictate one-seven-eighty. Identity of officers. Who are you?’

‘I told you. Interior Cases.’

‘Names?’

‘Marshals Whygott and Coober. All right? Are we done?’ ‘We’re done,’ Plyton said, and walked back to the Bergman.

SHE PARKED THE old roadster in the depths of the rockcrete bay under the central tower, left her permit on the dash, and went upstairs with Limbwall.

The Department of Special Crime was ominously silent. There was no one around, not even Mamzel Lotilla. Under the cream-shaded electro lamps of the wooden mezzanine, the desks were silent and unoccupied, the teetering towers of files and folders stirring in the processed breeze.

Plyton and Limbwall looked at each other. They could hear voices raised in the deputy magistratum’s private office.

Plyton sat down at her desk and code-entered her cogitator’s data-function along with the Canticle of Awakening. Surface data fluttered up, but nothing deep. All her precious records of the Aulsman case, including the first round of picts she’d taken of the secret ceiling, were inaccessible. Blanked. Gone.

That had never happened before.

Well, that wasn't actually true. A year or so earlier, there had been a case, a street-crime woman who had claimed she was an Imperial inquisitor. Gideon something. Two men had come to see Rickens, and shortly afterwards the file trace had been erased. She queried, and Rickens had told her to forget it. 'No good will come of it,' he'd said.

Plyton had tried to forget about it, but it wasn't easy. She'd always assumed the affair had really concerned an Imperial inquisitor. Why else would Rickens have erased the file? It made her feel better about it to think she was secretly serving the holy ordos of the God-Emperor.

But this?

What was the excuse this time?

The main elevator hatch swished open, loud in the quiet office space. The breeze ruffled the stacked paper files. A squad of cogitator adepts from Technicus, escorted by a phalanx of Magistratum marshals, entered the Special Crime department.

The adepts set to work at once, dismantling the department's cogitators.

'What the hell is this?' Limbwall cried.

The marshals slammed him against a wall and began to beat him. Plyton rose from her seat slowly. Weapons were aimed at her.

The marshals were wearing the bright orange flame-badges of Interior Cases.

'Stop it,' Plyton said. 'Stop hitting him.'

The visored marshals carried on punching and kicking Limbwall until he fell down on the floor, one optic unit cracked.

'I want to know where in the name of the Emperor you find the authority to do this,' Plyton said.

The door of Rickens's office flew open and a large man strode out. Plyton recognised him immediately. Senior Magistratum Sankels, the head of the Interior Cases Division, the wing of the Magistratum that investigated the Magistratum itself.

Sankels turned and yelled back into Rickens's office. 'Today, you hear me? Today!'

Walking past Plyton, Sankels glared at her.

Then he was gone.

'Maud?' Rickens called from the door of his office. She hurried over to him, and he drew her inside and closed the door.

'What's going on?' she asked.

Rickens looked pale, as if in shock, and sat down in his ornate cathedra. 'Something,' he said.

'Sir?'

He looked up at her. 'Maud,' he said. 'I'm going to hate myself for asking this, but did you knowingly break procedure when you investigated the Aulsman death?'

'No, sir.'

'I didn't think so. You recorded every particular of your crime scene entry?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Every particular?'

'By the book, sir. What's going on?'

Rickens set his hands down on the console before him. His hands were shaking. 'As of nine-twenty this morning, the Department of Special Crime was suspended pending investigation.'

'What?'

'Suspended. Interior Cases is taking over. There has been a submission that we have mishandled the Aulsman case. A lack of procedure. A cover-up.'

'Not at all, sir...'

'I know. I believe that, Maud. But Sankels has other ideas. We've been told to stand down, confined to domestic habs, while the investigation proceeds. Apparently there are strong links between our handling of the Aulsman death and the attempt on Chief Provost Trice's life last night.'

‘Oh my Throne! They tried to kill him?’

‘Who?’

‘Sir, I have no idea! I heard rumours...’

‘The rumours were true. And here we stand. I need your shield and your weapon, Maud.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Because as of now you are relieved of duty. Interior Cases will want to question you. You are required to return to your hab and wait there until they come.’

‘I did nothing wrong!’

‘I know, Maud. But still...’

Plyton unhooked her token and unfastened her holster. She placed the shield and her weapon on Rickens’s desk.

‘Go home and wait,’ Rickens told her. ‘I’ll try to get this affair straight as best I can.’



THIRTEEN

IN ITS SLEEP, the *Arethusa* groaned gently. The layover at Eustis Majoris high anchor meant there was time to afford a general system shutdown and a proper overhaul. Inert and slumbering, the old ship settled, its superstructure groaning and creaking as the stresses of the voyage were soothed away by the unexpected rest.

Wandering the half-lit sub-tunnels and lower decks, Sholto Unwerth was pleasantly reassured by the creaking and sighing of the metal hulk around him. The sounds made him think of the ship as alive. Besides, he'd sent the twenty men of his crew ashore for relaxation at the harbour taverns, and total silence would have been unnerving.

Unwerth was assessing the general repair of the ship. Three small servitors clattered after him obediently. Two were basic maintenance units. The third carried a massive, leather-cased book in its upper limbs, supporting it open as if its arms were a lectern. The book was the *Arethusa's* repair ledger. At every inspection point, Unwerth would make some observations then walk over to the book the servitor held for him. With an ink pen, Unwerth carefully added any work needed to the manifest list, which the crew would consult later as they rostered for repair duties. A simple data-slate would have done the job, but Unwerth had a particular devotion to the sheer material substance of paper.

The shipmaster's penmanship, like the shipmaster himself, was small and intricate.

'Sub-duct one-three-four-one, lower service deck, renew insulation on power trunking and replace digita valves two-six-two through two-six-nine,' he murmured to himself as he wrote, timing the words to the speed of his pen, so they came out with an odd, halting cadence.

He screwed the lid back on the pen. 'There. That is a sufficiency in this venue. Let us constitute ourselves to the next juncture.' He set off. The three servitors twitched and abruptly rattled along in his wake. He stopped suddenly and examined part of the dingy hallway's wall. 'Oh dear. Bless me, no. That's unacceptable. See, this formentable rustication?'

The three servitors cocked their metal skulls. 'Rustication of this magnetism is unacceptable, as it underwhelms the integrated solidnessity of the vessel,' Unwerth unscrewed his pen and made some more fastidious notes.

'Lower service deck, treat rusticated wall patches with sealant. Also buff theresaid.'

They continued with their tour and entered the gloomy cave of the ship's rear hold. It was a poor twilight in here, half the overhead lumins out of action (Unwerth noted this carefully). There was also some buckling to several of the deck plates. Unwerth had the two repair units hold up their photovoltaic lamps and aim the beams at the floor while he hunched down to inspect it.

There was another creak of metal, but Unwerth ignored it. He ran his fingers over the damaged deck-section and tutted quietly. Then something blocked out the light of the lamps.

'Arise them gainfully, you defuncts!' he called out. He was still in shadow.

'You,' said a voice. It was low, so very, very deep.

Sholto Unwerth turned and gazed up at the titanic figure behind him. He blinked. He knew all too well who this man was, and what line of business he was in.

'I do not have a remembrance of inviting you aboard my ship, Master Worna,' he said, trying and, for the most part, failing to keep the note of anxiety out of his voice.

'That's because you didn't, Unwerth,' replied Lucius Worna.

'You know m-my name?'

‘Sholto Unwerth, shipmaster of the *Arethusa*. It’s my business to know facts like that. Particularly as I’ve been looking for you.’

‘L-looking? For me? W-why? Why? Why for have you been looking for me?’

‘Because we’re going to have a conversation.’

‘I have nothing to converse with you, sir. My lips are soiled.’

‘I heard you usually had plenty to say Unwerth. A babbler, that’s what I’ve heard. Plenty to say and ninety per cent of it crap. I’m interested in the ten per cent of sense you sometimes manage.’

Unwerth drew himself up to his full height – which put his eyes on a level with Worna’s navel – and said, ‘I would be most ingratuitous if you were kindly permissive and removed your personable from my ship.’

Lucius Worna turned casually and struck one of the repair servitors with the back of his hand. The force of the brutal slap sent the delicate machine tumbling across the deck, dented and cracked, sparks fizzling from torn hoses and servo-meshes. ‘A conversation,’ he rumbled. ‘End of story.’

WORNA TOOK THE shipmaster up to the small retiring lounge behind the bridge. En route, Unwerth saw other intruders aboard his ship, rough-looking crew-types, all of them armed with handguns. They were standing watch at hatches and junctions, ready to greet any of Unwerth’s own crew who came back. Several more were on the bridge itself, searching through the database and the paper records.

Unwerth would have been bristling with outrage, if total fear hadn’t been eclipsing every other emotion and thought. He was not a brave man, and avoided confrontation at all costs. In a quiet life of trading, he’d never been boarded, never been attacked, and never had his life and welfare threatened so comprehensively.

He said nothing, just did what he was told. Worna indicated he should sit down on the leather bench built into the retiring cabin’s end wall.

Worna remained standing. The bounty hunter idly began to unclasp and remove the armoured gauntlets of his carapace armour, and set them on a

side table. His big hands were as scarred and gnarled as his head.

‘You were at Bonner’s Reach, for Firetide.’

Unwerth shrugged, not sure if it was a question, and not at all certain he wanted to answer it if it was.

‘Then you came down the sub-lane during the course of the season, via Encage, Bostol, that route. And ended up here, six days ago.’

Unwerth shrugged again.

‘Good trip, was it? Good trade? You carry cargo?’

‘Some pulchritude of an amount. It has been a poor season.’

‘Gonna get worse yet,’ Worna said. ‘What about passengers?’

Unwerth said nothing.

Worna smiled. ‘You’re afraid of me, aren’t you?’

‘I cannot receive of a notion why I shouldn’t be.’

‘Damn right. I’m a scary man. And maybe that’s what’s gluing up your famous blabbermouth. Maybe you’d be happier talking to a kindred soul?’

Worna went to the cabin door and beckoned for someone. A red-haired man in a jacket of Vitrian glass entered the room.

‘Hello, Unwerth,’ he said. ‘You know who I am?’

Unwerth nodded. ‘Master Siskind of the *Allure*.’

‘Now don’t mind Lucius here. He’s working for me. Help me out, and I won’t pay him to damage you.’

‘I am most revived to hear so, Master Siskind. In what fashionable way can I help you?’

‘Let me start by apologising, Unwerth,’ Siskind said. ‘Boarding your ship like this, taking control. No master likes to be treated like that.’

‘Indeed not.’

‘But understand, until I get what I want, my men will remain in control. And any of your crew who tries to alter that fact will regret it. I’m looking for the *Oktober Country*, Unwerth. I’m looking for the *Oktober Country* and its master, Kizary Thekla.’

Unwerth cleared his throat. 'Then you have importuned your radiation in the unrequisite direction, Master Siskind. I am not he, nor is he here, in manner of fact. When last I left my eyes on him, he was at the Reach, during Firetide.'

'You saw him there?' Siskind said, picking up an astrolabe from a shelf and toying with it.

'In consideration, yes. I spoke at him. He was deferably present, as was Master Akunin, and other worthied eminencies of their cartel.'

'All of whom had left the Reach by the time I put in,' Siskind told Worna. He looked back at Unwerth. 'What did you talk to Thekla about?'

'I took a meeting with the beneficial master, and extravagated about mercantile dealings that might arise, perspicaciously, between our two selves.'

Siskind burst out laughing. 'Unwerth, Unwerth... the cartel Thekla and Akunin belong to is out of my league, let alone yours. How do you deal with the shame, trying to broker deals with men like that? Throne, you're a nothing. A nobody midget in a tramp ship.'

Blinking hard, Unwerth looked aside.

'Listen to me, Unwerth,' Siskind said. 'I was supposed to meet Thekla at the Reach, but I was delayed. By the time I'd got there, he'd gone. Under normal circumstances, he would have left a message for me, but he didn't. Naturally, I was worried. So I hired Master Worna to do some hunting around. Guess what he turned up?'

'I have no ideology of that answer,' Unwerth said.

'Just after Firetide, a bulk lifter, registered – according to its transponder codes – to the *Oktober Country*, docked at Bonner's Reach. Its occupants were not identified. In fact, the Vigilants' records show the lifter's occupants chose anonymity. But there's one thing the records do show. Those people, whoever they were, took a private meeting with you. Shortly after, this heap of junk left the Reach and began its journey here.'

'Who were those people?' Worna asked.

'I can't quite reminisce...' Unwerth began.

‘Don’t give me that!’ Siskind spat. ‘We saw the records. Facts, Unwerth. Don’t embarrass yourself with a lie. Either you met with Thekla, or with representatives of his ship, or you met with people who had somehow acquired a lifter belonging to the *Oktober Country*. Which was it?’

Sholto Unwerth, so small his feet swung off the bench seat and didn’t reach the ground, bravely shook his head.

‘You carried passengers on this run, didn’t you?’ Worna growled. ‘All the way from the Reach to Eustis.’

‘Just cargo,’ Unwerth said.

‘Ornales?’ Siskind called. Another man came into the cabin, and handed Siskind one of the *Arethusa*’s leather-bound manifests. Siskind skimmed through the pages to the last entry.

‘Here, in your own hand, Unwerth. Passage arranged from Bonner’s Reach to Eustis Majoris. Eight persons. Price agreed. No names recorded.’

Unwerth knew when lying was hopeless. ‘I was pertained by those persons to act as conveyance. They have quit the ship now.’

‘Who were they?’

‘Traders, I conceive. I asked no query of them.’

‘Come on, you little bastard!’

‘If I knew names,’ Unwerth blurted, ‘I would not obligate you with them! A shipmaster and his clients enrapture the principles of privatisation and confidence! As a master yourself, you know that!’

‘You know,’ grinned Siskind, handing the manifest back to his first officer, ‘I admire your professionalism, Unwerth, I really do. Client confidentiality. That’s something I try to uphold in every circumstance. But I’d waive the privilege like a shot if my ship was being held by force and I was in the same room as Lucius Worna. So... give me the damn names.’

‘No,’ said Unwerth.

‘All right, answer this. What do you know of a man named Gideon Ravenor?’

‘Nothing,’ said Sholto Unwerth flatly.

Siskind turned to Worna. ‘Your witness,’ he said.

Lucius Worna reached into a belt pouch and took something out that began to chitter and vibrate.

‘Know what a cisor is?’ he asked.

Unwerth shook his head and slowly shrank back into the couch until he could go no further.

‘Well,’ said Worna. ‘You’re going to find out. Unless you answer the questions. Do you know Gideon Ravenor?’

‘Yes,’ said Unwerth.

‘He was your passenger? Him and his team?’

‘Yes,’ Unwerth said in a tiny, tiny voice.

‘Now we’re getting somewhere. What happened to Thekla and his ship?’

‘I don’t know! In absolute, I do not! They did not tell me!’

‘Maybe they didn’t. All right, here’s another. Where is Ravenor and his crew now?’

‘I don’t know. On the surface. That’s all I can explicate, to the best margin of my knowing.’

‘On the surface. Uh huh. And how do you contact them?’

‘I don’t! Our arrangementage is finished!’

‘You must know where they are, what they’re doing?’

‘I applore you, I don’t! They made a special immensity of not telling me the pertinence of their business! They said I shouldn’t know for the good of my health!’

Lucius Worna slowly raised the sawing cisor.

‘How wrong they were,’ he said.



FOURTEEN

PIECE BY PIECE, Carl Thonius was extracting the secrets of Tchaikov's riddle box. He'd been deciphering for two days. He wrote every scrap of data down on index cards and soft-gummed them to the wall of the east bedroom, rearranging them as more details fitted in. The entire wall was speckled with cards. Every once in a while Carl went to his cogitators, and checked a fact via his link to the Informium, or ran details through his arithmometer.

The sheer scale of the Contract Thirteen operation was becoming evident. It had been going on for years. I had suspected that thousands of tainted devices had been smuggled into Petropolis, but the actual figure was currently close to five million.

Five million! If that were true, vast substrates of the Administratum in the hive were currently using warp-infected engines on a daily basis. And the Contract Thirteen cartel had become very rich indeed. It was evident from the funds Tchaikov had been laundering for them. The Contract itself had paid out well, regularly, and it had been fearsomely supplemented by the trade in flects.

The foolish trade in flects. The greedy side-order they hadn't been able to resist, the very reason I had discovered their vile dealings in the first place. Their own greed had betrayed them.

I was still troubled by the deeper connections. The vein of *Cogitae* that ran through the players in this game. Thekla, Tchaikov, Siskind, though I didn't think that last fool was a player any more. Trice intrigued me, given his power and status, and Carl had been unable to draw up any background on the man. But I knew he employed powerful psykers. Kinsky, for one, and the unidentified fellow at the diplomatic palace. Then, of course, there

had been the assassination attempt itself. Trice had other enemies. Enemies who could conjure an incunabula. My gut feeling was the Divine Fraternity. Carl's initial findings showed they had cells operating on Eustis. That made me especially wary.

I was locked into their future predictions, their prospects. If they were attacking Trice, that meant my struggle with the cartel was somehow interfering with the fearful event that they were so keen to see happen.

So many pieces, like a vast game of regicide. At the centre of it all, I worried, was the mysterious, prophesied figure known as Slyte. The Divine Fraternity's messiah. What was he, what was it?

Zael's true name was Sleet. He was a mirror farseer, and so, by Eisenhorn's definition, especially luminous to the fraters. Had I really been so gullible as to accept a daemon into my midst? Was my sympathy for Zael my undoing, and the undoing of a subsector besides?

I prayed not. I was a man of careful, considered ambition. Though everything pointed to Zael, that seemed too easy. From experience, I know the universe is a far, far more complex mechanism.

I hovered behind Carl as he continued his work. He seemed to me to be edgy and restless. When he this-struck a key on the board of his cogitator, he cursed and oathed.

+Gently.+

'So much data,' he murmured. 'So much to co-ordinate. It gets me worked up.'

One thing we had fathomed from the riddle box: some of the cartel members had grown so rich on their profits that they had already quit and retired. That was virtually unheard of, a rogue trader selling up his ship and retiring to a life of luxury. But such were the vast earnings of these men. Marebos had purchased an entire island on Messina. Braeden had retreated to a castellated abbey above the Great Falls on Mirepoix. Counting their money, no doubt, rolling in it.

Athen Strykson had sold his ship and, combining that huge fund with his cartel earnings, had bought a retreat in a private canton of his homeworld.

Athen Strykson came from Eustis Majoris. The place he had purchased was in Farthingale, a rural seat fifteen hundred kilometres inland from Petropolis hive. For the first time in our investigation, we had an opportunity to meet with a cartel member face to face.

Nayl, Kys and Mathuin were en route right now. They were going to ask the ex-shipmaster a few pointed questions.

‘So much data,’ Carl complained again, pasting another card on the wall. ‘Couldn’t Zael help?’

‘No,’ I transponded. ‘I sent him to the kitchen to brew you some caff,’ Truth was, I wanted Zael as far away from this as possible. If he *was* Slyte...

There was a chime alarm. I heard Frauka go to the front door. He came back and leaned in to see me. ‘It’s the physician,’ he said.

I left Carl to his work and hovered down to greet Belknap. True to his promise, he’d come back to check on Kara.

He stood in the doorway, his bag in his hand.

‘Medicae.’

‘Inquisitor.’

‘I appreciate this.’

‘Good.’

‘Come up.’

He followed me up the stairs. He was a good man, a very principled man, I could feel that now, just as Kys had told me.

We went down the upper corridor towards Kara’s room. A cry stopped him in his tracks.

‘What was that?’ he asked.

‘Nothing that needs to concern you, doctor,’ I replied.

Another cry.

‘You want me to trust you, don’t you?’ Belknap said, turning to face me. ‘What the Throne was that?’

‘Our guest,’ I replied. ‘He does that from time to time.’

‘Let me see him.’

‘No.’

‘Then I’m leaving, Ravenor.’

‘Very well.’

I led Belknap down the hall and nudged open the door of Skoh’s room. Pulling at his shackles, Skoh screamed again for effect.

‘Holy Throne...’ Belknap said, gazing into the room.

‘They’re chafing me!’ Skoh cried. ‘They’re chafing my wrists so sore!’ He held up the manacles to show us.

‘This is disgraceful,’ Belknap said.

‘Skoh is my prisoner. A dangerous man. Don’t pity him, whatever you do,’ I said.

Belknap glowered at me. ‘He’s a man even so, stricken in health. My oath as a medicae means I have to see to him.’

‘Very well.’

Belknap walked over to Skoh and examined his manacles.

‘You have to release him. The binders are rubbing him raw and the sores are infected.’

‘He is an enemy of the Imperium, doctor,’ I said. ‘The binders stay on.’

‘Then I have to take him to the local medicae facility...’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I told you that secrecy was our only power here. Take Skoh to the local infirmary and he’ll blow our cover. He knows too much.’

‘Then what would you have me do, inquisitor?’

‘Treat him.’

Belknap produced a liniment from his bag and began to smooth the cream into Skoh’s wrists. ‘It’s a start,’ he said. ‘But I’m still not happy.’

KARA SWOLE WAS asleep when we went in. The medical apparatus Belknap had ordered was set up around her bed, pulsing and blinking.

‘Glory,’ Belknap said, looking at the equipment. ‘I made a list of things that would be useful and you went out and bought them all?’

‘I value Kara very much.’

‘All this stuff,’ Belknap said. ‘You don’t blink at the price. I could have equipped an entire low-stack surgery with this. What kind of people are you?’

‘The kind that will donate all of this to your practice, once we’re done,’ I said.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and started to examine Kara’s belly wound.

She rolled in her sleep and mumbled.

I went out of the room.

‘VOX FROM NAYL,’ Frauka said. ‘They’re in position and await your pleasure.’

‘Understood,’ I said. ‘Listen, Wystan, things are going to be quiet around her for a few hours. Why don’t you take Zael to a gallery? Maybe a museum. With so few of us around, I’d rather not leave him here to his own devices. Given what you told me.’

‘I understand,’ he said. ‘You want him kept away from anything sensitive when there’s no one around. No problem.’

He went off to find the boy. I slid into Carl’s room. ‘I’m going bodiless to work with Harlon. Wystan’s taking Zael on an excursion so you’ll be able to concentrate on the work.’

‘Good,’ he said.

‘Don’t forget to check on Skoh.’

‘Of course not.’

I went back into my private room, locked off my chair’s mobilisers, and sent my mind into the sky.

WARING ZEPH MATHUIN, I walked up the gravel path to join Kys and Harlon. Farthingale was a quiet interior town of broad avenues and pollarded trees. The sky was cloudy and morose. Athen Strykson’s mansion lay before us.

‘Let’s go and present ourselves,’ I said. We walked down to the gatehouse. Through the locked iron gates, we could see a dark space of lawn, and a path lined with enamel obelisks that led up to the mansion’s main doors.

Kys rang the bell-pull. The three of us were wearing simple black suits and long coats of grey wool.

‘Who visits?’ the vox speaker on the gatehouse wall crackled.

Kys leaned close to the speaking cone. ‘Department of Tithe and Tariff,’ she replied.

‘YOU SAID YOUR name was Belknap?’ Kara asked. She was sitting in the chair beside her bed. Her cheeks were pale and drawn.

‘That’s right,’ he said, adjusting the dials of one of the machines.

‘What you’re doing, all these tests. It’s very thorough.’

‘I’m a thorough person, Mamzel Swole.’

‘Even so...’

‘You were injured by a so-called vampire blade,’ Belknap said. ‘The injury is more than a stab wound. I need to run a complete biological audit to make sure there are no... secondary problems.’

‘You’ve stabilised the blade wound. It’s no longer a threat.’

‘Yes, but as I said, I need to—’

Kara looked at Belknap. ‘There’s no need for the cover story, doctor. The fact you want to run more tests has nothing to do with the blade injury. You picked up on something else while you were treating that. I know.’

‘I see.’

‘So, go on,’ Kara stared at him, smiling.

Belknap took a deep breath and handed her a display slate. ‘The expensive instruments your master has brought in don’t lie. You know what this is?’

‘I knew before the blade bit me,’ Kara said flatly.

‘Did you?’

‘Of course. I checked myself on a weekly basis using Unwerth’s autodoc.’

‘Who’s Unwerth?’ he asked.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ she replied quickly. ‘What matters is I know what this is. Astroblastoma. Last year, I took a leap off a docking bay in a vacu-suit. Exposed myself to megawatts of rad. I hoped the suit was shielded.’

‘I don’t think it was.’

‘Seems so. How long have I got?’

Belknap looked at the floor. ‘No more than six months, Mamzel Swole. I’m sorry.’

‘Why, it’s not your fault. Treatments?’

‘The condition is terminal. You understand that? There are certain palliatives that can make you more comfortable. And angiogenesis inhibitors that buy you a little more time, although carcinomatosis has begun.’

‘The cancer’s spreading to other parts of my body, you mean?’

‘Yes. Or you were so comprehensively irradiated you are developing multiple oncological responses.’

‘How long will I remain... active?’

‘With good fortune and the proper care, three or four months,’ Belknap replied. ‘Look, you need some rest now. I’ll come back tomorrow and we can discuss how we’re going to approach your treatment.’

‘We?’ Kara asked.

‘You’re my patient now,’ he said.

Kara reached out a hand and caught him gently by the sleeve. ‘One thing, Master Belknap, more important than anything else. Please don’t tell anyone about this yet. Not my friends. Not Ravenor. Especially not Ravenor. All right?’

Belknap nodded.



FIFTEEN

‘YOU’RE WHO?’ ASKED the housekeeper warily.

‘Department of Tithe and Tariff,’ Kys repeated politely. She showed the man her permit, and Harlon and I did the same. The man looked at them with some alarm, but seemed convinced. He ought to be. The permits were authentic. Carl had got them for us from the Informium itself.

We had been let into the vestibule of Strykson’s home. It was gloomy and cold: though the day was grey and overcast, no interior lights had been switched on. There wasn’t any sound except the ticking of a longcase chron and the clack of rooks cawing reedily out in the damp gardens.

‘What is this about?’ the housekeeper said. In my opinion, he was the least convincing thing around. A hard bodied man in early middle-age, he seemed more like a guard than a housekeeper. His voice and gestures certainly lacked the poise and polish that might have been expected of a senior servant or butler.

‘We’ve been sent to undertake a surprise inspection of Master Strykson’s financial records,’ Kys said.

‘What? Why?’ asked the man.

‘We should discuss that with Master Strykson himself, or with a clerk who can legally speak on his behalf.’

As Kys spoke with him, I looked into his mind and learned some basic facts. His name was Geren Felt and he was a member of Strykson’s house security. A few days earlier, following some incident in the hive – news of which had greatly distressed Strykson – the house staff had been scaled down to security personnel only. Felt had been ordered to act as housekeeper and answer any calls. Things were afoot, but Felt was too

junior to be privy to what. All he was sure of was that he had to check the sudden arrival of Imperial tax inspectors with his superiors.

‘Wait here, please,’ he said and hurried off. He took our permits with him.

+Strykson’s expecting trouble.+ I sent as we waited.

+Figures.+ Kys answered.+He must’ve heard that Tchaikov’s dead by now, so he knows the cartel is potentially under threat. And he’s the most visible member.+

I gently scanned the building.+There are eight people here with us. No, nine. A general sense of anxiety and suspicion directed at us. Tension.+

I sensed Nayl about to place a hand under his coat.

+No. I told you how we’d play this.+

Nayl’s hand slid out.

Felt returned. He didn’t have our permits, nor did he pass any comment on their absence. ‘This way, if you please.’

He led us out of the vestibule, into a wide hall where a grand staircase rose above us, along another stretch of corridor, under an arch and into a large salon intended for the entertainment of guests. The short trip was illuminating to me. I sensed the primed sentry gunpods concealed behind the vestibule doors, auto-tracking our heat as we went by. I sensed the guard with the hellgun poised behind the side arch of the hall, and the other two guards, both armed with lasrifles, up on the staircase landing out of sight. I felt the heartbeats of the men concealed behind the salon doors, weapons drawn, ready to enter. I touched the hard metal shapes of remote-operated plasma beamers in the false wall behind the salon’s wood panelling, their focus-nozzles aimed at us. I saw the electromagnetic shimmer of the multiple security picters tracking us as we walked, and gently psy-blurred our features so they wouldn’t read cleanly.

And I sensed the aide in an adjoining chamber, frantically checking our permits via a secure vox-link to Petropolis.

+The house staff are all around us, armed and ready to spring. Automated weapons systems too, the house is wired. Be wary but show no sign. Let’s

see how this plays.+

‘Uh, tea? Caffeine perhaps?’ Felt said awkwardly. From his agitated surface thoughts, I knew he had a sting-blunt tucked into the waistband of his trousers, though he wasn’t thinking about how quickly he could draw it. He was calculating which item of furniture in the room he should throw himself behind if things went awry.

‘No, thank you,’ said Kys.

We stood, waiting. I felt the tension swell to bursting point, the men hidden around us on a hair-trigger. I sent my mind back to the aide in the nearby chamber, watched as he spoke on the vox, read out our permit numbers, waited, and finally nodded.

‘They’re clear. Genuine,’ he called.

The automated weapon systems switched to ‘safety’ and depowered. The waiting men stood down and retreated.

+We’re fine.+

Athen Strykson came into the salon.

He was a tall, long-faced man with thin black hair and quick, intelligent eyes. He wore a well-tailored suit of selpic tarsh, and nodded to us politely.

‘I wasn’t told to expect a visit,’ he said. He had our permits in his hand. He waved Felt out of the room.

‘The department makes special visits from time to time. Unannounced. In our experience, notification of a visit sometimes gives a citizen undue opportunity for concealment,’ Kys smiled at him. ‘I’m sorry if this is inconvenient. You are Athen Strykson?’

‘Yes, I am. Can you tell me what this is about?’

‘You’ve recently taken up residence here on Eustis Majoris?’ Nayl asked.

‘I have. I’m retired. I bought this place nine months ago.’

‘Your previous employment was as a shipmaster?’ Kys said.

‘I was an owner-master. Seventy-nine years. Made my fortune, as they say, and came here to enjoy it. Look, my financial agents logged all my

records with your department for the purposes of disclosure and estimation of tariff burden. Everything is in order.'

'Indeed,' said Nayl. He opened the small black case he was carrying and took out a data-slate. 'The finance agency you retain has been very forthcoming and thorough. However, we have found a discrepancy that they are unable to account for.'

Strykson's face darkened. 'I do hope not. It cost me a significant sum to set up residency on this world. I did everything by the book, under advice. Paid what seemed like extravagant sums to the taxation department in recognition of my base worth. There were additional tariffs, settlement clauses, exchange considerations. Adopting the life of – aha – a simple citizen of this fine world cost me an exorbitant amount. Which I gave freely. I did not expect further swingeing demands to be made.'

'Of course not,' Kys said.

'Though that is perhaps a matter you should take up with your finance agents,' Nayl added.

'We're just doing our job,' Kys said.

'I know, I know,' Strykson said, half-smiling and raising his hand. I had been probing him gently while the discourse distracted him. He was wearing a psy-blocker in a silver charm around his neck, a fairly powerful device, but nothing like strong enough to keep me out. By the time he was half-smiling and raising his hand, I had deactivated it and moved into his mind.

What I found there was a curious mixture of annoyance and relief. Strykson had indeed been told about Tchaikov's demise. He'd had a call from Akunin, warning him. Akunin had been furious, complaining that Trice had refused to meet with him to discuss the matter.

'The bastard won't take it seriously,' Akunin had told Strykson. 'He thinks Tchaikov fell foul of a black market rival.'

'That's possible, isn't it?' Strykson had said.

'We chose her in the first place because she was a genuine player,' Akunin had said. 'No underworld rival would dare go up against her. Just

watch yourself, Athen. If someone's on to us, you will be next. You're the easiest one of us to find.'

Scared, Strykson had sealed his house and waited for the worst. Our knock on the door had jarred his nerves. He'd come very close to panic. Now, as it seemed, he had an impertinent but authentic visit from the tithe department to deal with. His relief was considerable. He'd thought for a moment some nemesis – the sort of force that had slaughtered Tchaikov and her retinue – had found him. All the same, he was exasperated. He'd been assured, by the Ministry operatives who had overseen his settlement, that his tax affairs would not be subject to scrutiny by the Department of Tithe and Tariff. One more perk of Contract Thirteen.

From his surface thoughts, I could read all the things that he thought had been covered up, all the things he was afraid might come out. Undeclared funds, sequestered shares, false business accounts, unpaid duty on—

There we go. I didn't want to rip into his mind and strip it. I didn't want him to even know what I was doing. This form of telepathic manipulation was akin to hypnotism, to gentle persuasion, to suggestion. His brain whirling with financial concerns, he was ripe and ready to give everything up.

'Master Strykson,' I said, speaking for the first time. 'There is the matter of mercantile process duty,' I spoke the words, forming Mathuin's voice into a smooth tone that would play mesmerically with a susceptible mind, but I also cast them, a telepathic echo to the speech. The echo was what really got under his skin.

'Process duty?'

'On the sale of your vessel, the *Bucentaur*. If the affidavits of fiscal gain and letters of dispensation signed by the agents are accurate, then the figures for anchorage tax and mercantile process duty are out by a factor of thirty-two per cent.'

The true figure was twenty-six, but I wanted him to be alarmed. A startled mind is even easier to control.

'Thirty-two?'

‘In wharfinger revenues alone, it is off by a margin of point nine. But mercantile process is our main concern, the department’s key area of discrepancy. The freight stamps are overdue by...’

+Eight years.+

‘Eight years,’ said Nayl, pretending to consult his slate.

‘Eight years?’ Strykson said, sitting down.

+And the tonnage band is wrongly declared.+

‘And the tonnage band is wrongly declared,’ Kys said.

+The *Bucentaur* was a class seven.+

‘Because the *Bucentaur* was a class seven,’ she finished.

‘Throne,’ Strykson whispered. ‘What is the duty remaining?’

‘The duty outstanding at this time,’ I said, ‘allowing for interest, is...’

+Is this, Athen. How long were you working for the cartel?+

Still caught up in his financial worries, Strykson shrugged. ‘No more than four years,’ He thought he was telling us about freight stamps.

+Who brought you in?+

‘Akunin and Vygold.’

+How many runs did you make to the Mergent Worlds?+

‘Nine,’ Strykson murmured, believing he had just explained how hard it was to get the fiscal reserve to advance mortgage on a ship sale.

‘Yes, that is always a difficulty,’ I said aloud.

‘The sale was handled by the brokers of the Navis Nobilite,’ Strykson said. ‘Gods, this is terrible. I need caffeine. Do you need caffeine?’

+You don’t need caffeine.+

‘I don’t need caffeine,’ he said, sitting down again, shaking his head. ‘Sorry, what did you just ask me?’

+Why did you leave the cartel?+

‘I’d earned enough. I mean, more than I’d ever dreamed. I was tired of the void. It seemed like a good opportunity.’ He paused and looked up, puzzled. ‘Was I... was I just talking about why I retired?’ he said.

I tightened my mental hold slightly, like a wrestler changing grips.

+No, Athen. You were telling me who you worked for. Who organised Contract Thirteen.+

‘Oh well, it was Akunin’s show. Him and Thekla, to begin with. They brought the rest of us in. Akunin liked to boast that his orders came from Jader Trice. But Thekla once told me that was just what Akunin liked to say. Pretending he had a direct line to the chief provost. The actual orders came via the Secretists.’

+Who are the Secretists?+

Strykson looked up and smiled. In his mind, he was gleefully telling me how the Navis Nobilite brokers couldn’t be trusted with a decent ship-sale if their eyes depended on it. His mouth was saying, ‘I don’t know. That’s the point. The Secretists are secret. They enforce the will of the Diadochoi. They cover up and protect his actions. And they’re bloody good at it too. Throne, I wouldn’t want to cross one of them! I met one once, at a dinner. Revoke, his name was. Akunin’s chief contact. The man was a monster. A stone killer.’

+What else can you tell me about this Revoke?+

‘Nothing, not much. Yellow eyes, that’s what I remember. Yellow frigging eyes...’ Strykson’s voice trailed off. As far as he would remember, he’d just said, ‘Never trust a broker. They don’t include windfall tariff in their estimates, and they try to claw thirteen per cent back at the sale.’

+What is the Diadochoi?+

‘The heir. The successor. The one that shall be.’

‘Is Jader Trice the Diadochoi?+

Strykson laughed out loud and stood up. ‘Of course not! He’s just the chief facilitator! The Diadochoi’s right-hand man.’

+Sit back down.+

He sat, subdued suddenly.

+The Diadochoi is someone more senior than the chief provost?+

‘Yes. Of course,’ Strykson said quietly.

With Zeph's eyes, I glanced at Kys and Harlon.

+What is the purpose of Contract Thirteen?+ Kys sent seductively.

Strykson looked up. 'To obtain data engines from the Mergent Worlds, Spica Maximal particularly, and supply them to the Ministries here on Eustis Majoris.'

+For what purpose?+

Strykson blinked. 'I honestly have no idea,' he said.

He wasn't lying.

'Let us consider your duty claims and compensatories,' I said. 'Oh, all right...' sighed Athen Strykson.



SIXTEEN

LATE AFTERNOON, THE city blurred by rain outside the windows. The Special Crime office should have been bustling at this hour. But Interior Cases had suspended everyone the morning before, and technicians had dismantled all the cogitators and taken them away, along with the mountains of paperwork and file cartons.

The quiet was funereal. Even the air systems had been turned off. Rickens wandered the length of the main office space, his cane tapping. This was so wrong. In all his years of devoted service, he'd never...

He heard a hatch open behind him, and turned. Sankels, big and barrel-chested in his service uniform, strode up between the empty desks until he was face to face with Rickens. Straight-backed compared to Rickens's hunched posture, Sankels was significantly younger, taller and more massive than the deputy magistratum. He looked down at Rickens with hooded eyes.

'You got my message?'

'Yes,' said Rickens.

'It's for the best,' Sankels said. 'A man with your career record and good reputation, with retirement prospects. It makes sense. This is a dreadful mess, Rickens, and there's no need to be dragged down with it. A quiet resignation, retirement on non-specific health grounds. Your pension will be secure. You'll be clear of anything that transpires.'

'And you come in and clean house once I'm gone?'

'Simply put,' said Sankels. He held out his hand, palm up. 'So?'

'So?'

'Your resignation, Deputy Rickens?'

‘You honestly thought I’d fold and make it that easy for you, Sankels?’ Rickens said.

The head of Interior Cases coloured slightly and withdrew his hand. ‘Don’t do this,’ he breathed through clenched teeth. ‘Don’t even begin to —’

‘I am an officer of the Imperial Magistratum,’ Rickens said. ‘Sworn to uphold civic law and the justice of the Emperor of Mankind. I protect the codes and practices that make our common freedom possible. I am not going to stand aside and make things easy for you.’

Sankels turned away and then snapped back round again, aiming a finger at Rickens’s face. Rickens didn’t flinch. ‘You don’t even begin to comprehend what you’re dealing with!’ Sankels shouted.

‘No, I don’t,’ Rickens agreed calmly. ‘I have absolutely no idea what is going on, what great darkness Interior Cases is closing ranks to conceal, except that my department has clearly stumbled on something important and has therefore been selected to take the fall.’

‘You—’

‘I’ll finish what I’m saying, Sankels. I know your department’s close connection to the Ministry of Sub-sector Trade, I know your close co-operative relationship with the chief provost. I don’t question that the attempt on Provost Trice’s life the other night was an act to be deplored by us all. I accept there may be matters of confidence, state secrets that I cannot be party to. But I will not allow my department to be sacrificed. If I resign, there will be no process of inquiry. No impediment to the swift and total disintegration of Special Crime.’

Rickens took a sheaf of papers from his coat pocket. ‘I have been in correspondence today, sir, with the Justiciary, the Advocate’s department, and the office of the Subsector Arbites. I have consulted with legal counsel. If I refuse to resign, you’ll have to impeach me or charge me. Either way, there will be a thorough legal examination of this matter. No cover up. No conspiracy. If the accusations levelled against this department, and the men and women who serve it, are true, you will have

to evidence those facts and develop a case that the Justiciary can try. If we're guilty, let us be found guilty. I will not be party to a backroom coup and the indiscriminate usurpation of constitutional process by a department that, in my opinion, is too powerful already. Interior Cases is part of the law, Sankels, not above it.'

'And you'll refuse to resign quietly, just to prove that point?'

'I won't budge, Sankels. I see it as my duty to the Throne itself.'

Sankels looked Rickens up and down slowly. 'Investigation and trial will destroy you, Rickens. Your reputation, your good name. I was trying to spare you the shame and ignominy.'

'I don't think that's what you were doing at all,' Rickens said. He walked past Sankels and headed for the door. 'I'm going home now. Tomorrow morning, I have the first of what I imagine will be a considerable number of meetings with Justiciary counsel in preparation for your investigation. They will of course require access to all the files and digital documents you removed from this office. And I'm sure that one of their first recommendations will be for me to contact the Officio Inquisitorus Planetia to inform them of the impending legal action.' Sankels started to say something, then closed his mouth. 'Good night to you, sir,' said Rickens, and left the room.

Sankels stood alone for a moment, then took his hand-vox from its belt pouch. He selected a secure channel.

'This is Sankels. I'm going to need a meeting with the chief provost at his earliest convenience.'

ORFEO CULZEAN WAS sipping nettle tea and reading when the fraters called upon him unannounced. It was early evening, and the climate in the Regency Viceroy suite had been notched up to counter the inclement weather outside. Culzean sat at a desk, surrounded by old manuscripts, ancient documents recorded in slate-form and crumbling books. The current volume under inspection was written in a xeno script, and he was

having to hold up a bulky brass translation viewer in front of his eyes like opera glasses. The simivulpa was playing under his chair.

Orfeo Culzean had almost filled the memory of a data-slate with notes from his reading. Enuncia. He wondered if it could possibly be true.

‘The fraters have come to see you,’ Leyla Slade said.

Culzean lowered his viewer. ‘Now?’

‘Shall I tell them you’re not available?’

‘No, I am in their employ. Show them in. But, Leyla?’

‘Sir?’

‘Lurk, please.’

She nodded. She showed the fraters in.

‘Frater Arthous. Frater Stefoy,’ Culzean said as he rose to his feet.

The men bowed. Not so much respect today, Culzean thought. Their real eyes were patched.

‘We look upon you, Orfeo Culzean,’ said Stefoy.

‘I wasn’t expecting you,’ Culzean said. ‘Would you care for refreshment?’

‘No, thank you,’ said Arthous. He took a small piece of folded silk out of his pocket with his scarred fingers and unwrapped it. In the centre was the buckled piece of focus ring.

‘For your collection, as requested.’

Culzean took it and examined it. ‘Wonderful. Thank you. But I can’t believe the two of you came here just to give me this.’

‘No,’ said Stefoy. ‘The magus-clancular asked us to attend you and update you on the prospect.’

‘As per your advice,’ Arthous said, ‘the Fraternity has been examining the meniscus to see what determiners may have changed, and how this may effect the likelihood of the prospect.’

‘You’ll be pleased to know that the percentage likelihood has not declined. Indeed,’ said Stefoy, ‘it may have increased. Though still living, Trice may have been altered as a determiner.’

‘I expected as much. Trice will be fearful, and cautious. That will stay his hand, and to our advantage. Good. I’m pleased.’

Arthous took out a piece of paper. ‘Also one of the newer determiners has been read as becoming significantly more important during the last ten hours.’

‘Indeed. A negative?’ asked Culzean.

‘No, a positive,’ replied Arthous.

Culzean took the paper and read it. ‘This name again. Do we know who it is? Who it means?’

‘We’re looking into that now,’ replied Stefoy. ‘Belknap,’ Culzean murmured to himself. ‘Belknap...’

THE GOOD DOCTOR had gone for the day, Kara was asleep, and Miserimus was quiet. Carl Thonius left his whirring cogitators and the wall of pasted index cards for a moment and walked about the halls and landings of the house to clear his head and loosen his limbs.

He felt ill, and he knew why. He tried to put it out of his mind, but it nagged. The need, pecking at the shell of his resolve. It should never have got like this, he thought to himself. Never. He was a fool and if he didn’t stop he would be found out and everything would— Everything would be bad.

Carl paused in front of a full-length mirror in the hallway. He saw himself, looking tired, sort of ill. His skin was pale and dry, his eyes shadowed. But still, he thought, I cut quite a dash. The black tunic coat and trousers, the black boots, a subtle look today, though that subtlety was perfectly counterpointed by the cazurite brooch on his lapel.

Then he thought about what he was doing. Looking in a mirror. Looking in a mirror, in a mirror, in—

He tried to look away, but the feeling had dug too deep already. He walked into his room, opened a locked compartment in his trunk, and took out one of the parcels wrapped in red tissue paper.

He unwrapped it, his hands shaking, drew a deep breath, and looked down into the flect. What marvels this time? What rapture would— He went blind. No, not blind. Deaf. No, not deaf— Falling. He was falling. There was a pit filled with the darkest smoke of Old Night, and the flicker of forgotten suns, spinning into oblivion, and an ochone moaning that crackled like an untuned vox.

And there was something there in the darkness, swooping around him as he fell into the infinite, his mouth screaming but making no sound.

Something pale and cold, yet burning, something anguished and spawned, something old.

Something so dreadful. Sheer, inarticulate terror infected Carl Thonius like a disease and snorted like a beast behind his eyes.

His blood froze solid, crackling in his veins. His heart seized, a dead, leaden weight in his chest. His eyes caught fire.

And he died.



SEVENTEEN

A TERRIBLE, STUNNING blow struck the back of his head. It was the floor. He lay on his back, twitching, gurgling, then went still.

Seconds passed with glacial slowness. The cogitators clicked and hummed, auto-processing. Lamplight glinted off the open riddle box and the shattered flect on the floor.

With a sudden gasp, Carl sat up. He panted furiously, blinking. He tried to remember where he was. Who he was. There was a terrible taste in his mouth.

He looked around, and began to remember. There on the floor beside him, the broken flect.

‘Oh, gods...’ Thonius mumbled. Stupid, stupid, stupid...

He pulled himself to his feet. His skin was gooseflesh, his clothes cold and lank with sweat. He tried not to think of the things he’d witnessed in that moment. Stupid! STUPID!

‘Bad trip,’ he said out loud in a shaky voice. ‘That’s all it was. Bad trip. Your own stupid fault...’

He bent down and collected up the pieces of the broken flect, wrapped them in the tissue paper and hid them in his luggage.

Suddenly, he snapped round. How long had he been out? He looked at the chron on the desk. An hour. He’d lost an entire hour at least.

Something cried out and made him jump. For a second he thought it was the lamenting moan that had called out to him as he’d fallen into the pit and—

There was no pit. No darkness. No moaning. He breathed hard to control his panic. That had all been a dream, just a spasm in his mind. Everything was okay.

The cry came again. From along the hall.

‘Shit!’ Carl said. ‘Skoh!’

THONIUS UNLOCKED THE door and looked in. Skoh sat on the chair staring at him.

‘About time,’ he said. ‘I’ve been calling. Calling for ages.’

‘Well, I’m here now. What’s the problem?’

Skoh raised his manacled hands. ‘Same as usual. Cramps.’

‘I thought the doctor gave you a liniment?’ said Carl.

‘For my skin, not the cramps,’ said Skoh.

‘All right,’ Carl walked into the room until he was just beyond the reach of the floor chain. ‘You know the drill. Show me.’

Skoh raised his hands, to show that both of the heavy steel manacles were locked tight around his wrists.

Carl took the key from his pocket and tossed it to Skoh. The hunter caught it, undid his cuffs and began to rub his wrists.

‘That’s enough,’ said Carl.

‘Give me a minute,’ Skoh replied, flexing his aching joints.

‘Now,’ said Carl.

With a glare, Skoh locked the manacles back in place again. He tossed the key back to Carl.

‘Show me.’

‘What the hell’s wrong with your nose?’ Skoh asked.

‘What?’

‘You’re bleeding,’ Skoh said, nodding his head at Thonius. Carl felt at his face, saw the red on his fingertips.

‘Damn it!’ he said and went out, slamming the door and locking it. He hurried to the hall mirror. His nose was bleeding freely, and his eyes were hideously bloodshot. ‘Oh, Throne...’ he whispered.

FEAVER SKOH WAITED a few seconds, then slipped his hands out of the cuffs. He had re-locked them loose, but even so it skinned his knuckles pulling them off. The doctor's greasy liniment helped. Without that lubrication...

He went to the door, knowing it was locked. No time for caution now. This was the chance, the fleeting chance.

Skoh was a strong man, and desperation made him stronger. One kick smashed the door out of its frame.

Carl turned at the crash. Skoh was already moving, charging him like a bull. The hunter body-slammed into Carl and drove him back into the wall, shattering the mirror. Carl tried to fight Skoh off, but the other man was much more powerful. He slammed Carl into the wall again, then punched him in the face. Carl flew backwards, hit the jamb of the doorway opposite and fell to the floor, unconscious.

Skoh thought for a second about finishing the job. It would be a pleasure to kill the bastard interrogator. But he knew there wasn't time. If the others were about, they'd have heard all this. He ran for the stairs, flying down them.

In pyjama pants and a singlet, Kara emerged from her room. 'Carl? What the hell's going—'

She saw Skoh leaping down the staircase.

'Damn it, no!' she yelled, and ran after him, ignoring the pain in her belly. Skoh had a good lead. He was in the hall before she was even halfway down the stairs. Seeing her, he turned and hurled a hall chair at her. She ducked, and it broke against the heavy banister.

Skoh was at the front door, throwing the deadbolts, and then he was out, onto the path, into the cold grey evening.

Barefoot, in agony, Kara pursued him. Onto the street, the wide, quiet avenue. No traffic, no pedestrians. Just the high, ivy-clad walls of the neighbouring mansions, streetlamps, alarm posts.

Even hurt, she was fast. Sprinting furiously, she began to close the distance on the fleeing man. He couldn't escape. He simply couldn't. It

would blow everything.

They reached the street corner. Kara was close enough to grab him now, but as she clawed out, her foot slipped on wet leaves and she fell sideways against a wall.

Kara howled. Something had torn – Belknap’s perfect stitching, probably. She tried to rise, but she couldn’t. The pain was awful. Blood was soaking the front of her singlet.

Skoh was disappearing down the street.

Carl Thonius leapt past her. Still running, he looked back. His face was a bloody mess. ‘Get back!’ he yelled. ‘Get back and secure the house! Call the others!’

‘Carl!’

‘Do it! I’ll get Skoh!’

One hand on the wall, the other wrapped around her belly, Kara hobbled slowly back towards Miserimus.

AS PER HIS habit, Dersk Rickens got off the rail transit a stop early, and walked the last two kilometres to his home. He’d done it for years, mainly to ensure he maintained a modicum of exercise in his life. But he also liked the surface level streets of Formal E at night. The busy cafes, the dining houses, the music halls along the Griselda Wall.

It was dark now, the city lit up with yellow lamps, and there was a threat of rain in the air. Even so, he waved off the boy gampers who approached him as he came down Eisel Stack underwalk and limped up the steps onto the ironwork footbridge over the yawning hydroelectric canyon. There was no one on the bridge. A few spots of rain struck against the bridge’s tintglas roof. A cold night wind, scented with nitric acid, blew in through the sides of the bridge’s open framework.

Rickens tapped his cane along the bridge deck.

A figure appeared at the far end of the bridge and started to walk to meet him. The man was lean, well-dressed, and smoked a lho-stick in a long

holder. His eyes, in the yellow cast of the street lanterns, seemed colourless.

Rickens had been on the force long enough to be wary. His left hand closed on the snub he carried in his coat pocket. A mugging. Now that would be a perfect end to this particularly crappy day. Though the man looked too well dressed to be a mugger. Not the usual moody vermin.

Walking, they came close, almost eye to eye, then passed each other.

Rickens relaxed slightly. False alarm.

The man suddenly stopped and turned. He called out, 'Excuse me. Sir?'

Rickens halted, and turned back. 'Yes?'

The man was coming back to him, his expression one of curiosity. 'Dersk Rickens? Am I right?'

Rickens stiffened. 'Well, this is more than chance. In a hive this size. A random meeting on an empty bridge. With someone who knows my name.'

'I suppose so,' said the stranger. 'Nice to see the old instincts are still there. And thank you for confirming that your name is Dersk Rickens.'

'I'm not smiling, son,' said Rickens, sliding the safety off the weapon in his pocket. 'Who sent you? Sankels?'

'He put in a call, but he doesn't have that kind of clout. Not even nearly. Only one man in this hive gives orders to the Secretists.'

Rickens sniggered. 'Well, that's the stupidest name I've heard in a while. What, am I supposed to be afraid?'

'Your choice,' said Toros Revoke.

'Relax, son,' Rickens said. 'I know what this is. A little scare tactic to make me change my mind and resign after all. I've been expecting it. Let's get it over with. Make your threats, hit me if you intend to. I imagine your boss will want you to do that and I don't want to get you into trouble. I just want to get home. So, come on.'

Revoke smiled. 'You think I'm here to put the frighteners on you? Dish out some intimidation to get you to be nice and play along?'

‘Something like that.’

‘Sorry, that moment’s long passed,’ Revoke clicked his fingers.

Rickens heard a humming sound behind him. He turned. At the far end of the bridge, silhouetted against the lamplight, a tall, hunched man with long, straggly hair was spinning what looked like a bull-roarer.

‘All right,’ Rickens said. ‘If this is how you want it.’

He pulled the gun, and raised it, but the man with yellow eyes had vanished. Rickens turned, aiming his weapon at the other figure, and advanced towards him.

That damn thing in the man’s hand was still circling and humming.

‘Magistratum!’ Rickens cried out. ‘Drop that and assume the position! This is your first and only warning!’

There was a sound, suddenly, like metal whisks churning milk. For a second, Rickens thought the rain had begun. He glanced around.

Wings beating, the sheen birds mobbed in through the open side of the bridge frame. Hundreds of them, chrome and steel and silver, like a snowstorm fury driven by the wind.

Rickens cried out. He fired once, twice, three times, his gun-flash lighting the dark and glittering off the swirling metal wings of the flock.

Then the Unkindness enveloped him, jabbing and pecking, and he staggered backwards. The force of them drove him back over the rail. As Rickens fell into the vast hydroelectric canyon, he was already dead, his skin flayed off.

Drax stopped swinging the lure. Toros Revoke came out of the shadows, picked up the steel-shod walking cane, and threw it off the bridge into the night.



EIGHTEEN

SKOH VAULTED THE wall at the end of Parnassus, and dropped onto the metal walkway. He found the stairwell and thundered down-stack towards the arterial.

Carl Thonius was about twenty paces behind him.

They were moving through pedestrians now, thickets of citizens, tradesmen and gampers who leapt aside and turned to stare at the two racing men. Carl could hear the noise of the traffic from the four-lane arterial. He knew Skoh was blocked. There wasn't a crossbridge for nine stacks. Skoh could either go along, or down again, into the sinks.

Carl saw Skoh up ahead, slamming through the crowd, knocking people down. He was heading towards the lower pavements.

Carl wasn't entirely sure how he was managing to keep up with the hunter. Lactic acid burned in his muscles, and his face hurt like hell. He realised it was simple. He absolutely didn't want to let Ravenor down.

Skoh couldn't be allowed to get away. He couldn't be allowed to contact his co-conspirators. It was a mortal lock. Carl simply had to catch him and stop him.

If only he'd brought a weapon. The Hecuter 6 would have made this so much simpler.

Carl lost sight of Skoh. The man had ducked left into a crosswalk between two interlocked stack towers. Carl followed, and slewed to a halt. The crosswalk was empty. Where the hell had Skoh g—

Feaver Skoh, equally weary, was tired of running. He came out of the shadows like a pouncing carnodon.

But Carl Thonius was caught up in a rush now. He turned, met the attack, and drove his fist into Skoh's nose. The hunter reeled away, then lunged

back with a potentially backbreaking punch that Carl sidestepped.

Carl was a slight, slender man, but he was quick, and he had been trained by the Inquisition's best. You didn't make interrogator without learning certain skills. The fact that Carl Thonius avoided physical combat didn't mean he wasn't capable of it.

The fight lasted ten seconds. In that brief time, the two men traded almost fifty strikes and counter strikes, whip-snake fast, the precise martial skills of the Throne agent pitted against the brute force and cunning of a game hunter who had survived the dangers of countless bar-fights and rip worlds.

Passers-by from the main street gawped at what they saw occurring down the alleyway. Two men, blurs, engaged in a level of physical war that was seldom seen, even in a city that boasted the Carnivora. Every punch, every kick, was a potential killer; every block, every smash, bone-breaking.

Carl dodged, cracked Skoh's ribs with an under-punch, then chopped wide at his exposed neck, but Skoh lurched aside, caught the chopping hand, and viced to snap it. Carl had to somersault out of the hold, and kicked out Skoh's right leg from behind as he landed.

Skoh stumbled, but turned the fall into a sweep with his feet that Carl was forced to leap over.

Skoh came up, broke Carl's nose for the second time that night, and crushed his left ear, but Carl blocked the third punch, broke another of Skoh's ribs with a sidekick, and burst Skoh's right eye with a hammer-claw.

Skoh staggered backwards. Carl leapt at him, but had underestimated the hunter's burning resolve. Skoh threw a punch that hit Carl in the throat and dropped him onto his knees, choking.

Skoh started to run again. The crosswalk went nowhere except the fence overlooking the roaring arterial highway. Skoh scaled the fence, shivering the chainlink, kicking off Carl's hands as they tried to grab his ankles. He went over the fence top and fell onto one of the box-girders over the rushing traffic ten metres below.

He clawed up, and began to tightrope along the girder, arms out.

Carl followed him, sliding over the chainlink and down onto the narrow footing of the girder. It was so narrow, barely the width of his feet placed side by side. Vast transporters and cargo trucks roared by below them.

Skoh saw Carl coming after him. He looked down at the racing traffic of the arterial, all four speeding lanes, and jumped.

‘Holy Throne!’ Carl cried.

Whether by luck or judgement, Skoh landed on the top of a cargo-10’s freight container. He grabbed onto the netting before the slipstream dragged him off.

Carl jumped too.

The impact of landing punched the breath out of him, but he managed to stay on top of a parcel transporter four vehicles behind Skoh’s ride.

Everything shook. The wind was in his face. Road sign displays whipped overhead, brightly lit and dangerously close.

Carl clambered up, dragged himself forward. In disbelief, he watched as Skoh jumped from the cargo-10 onto the back of a low-rider track that was busy overtaking it.

Carl got up and threw himself into space, slamming down on the roof of a transit omnibus in the outside lane. The roof was flat metal, and Carl almost slithered right off until he got hold of the sill of the roof light.

Up ahead, there was Skoh, getting up and looking back. He saw Carl.

‘Bastard...’ Carl stuttered, trying to hold on.

The thundering traffic suddenly slowed down so violently that Carl was thrown flat again.

The overhead alerts announced an accident at Whitnee Circus. Abruptly, they were almost at a standstill. Carl got up, leapt off the omnibus and onto the roof of a small private transport, denting it. He heard cries of complaint. Skoh was moving too, off the low-rider onto a crawling cargo-8, and off that straight onto a limousine.

Carl followed, jumping from one slow-moving vehicle to the next, ignoring the protests of the drivers and the blaring horns. He almost missed his footing leaping for a cargo-10, almost went under its wheels.

Almost...

Skoh bounced off the roof of a sedan, and rode the windscreen down onto the bonnet. The vehicle braked hard, and the van behind rear-ended it with a brutal shunt. Horns blasted again. From where Carl was, it looked as if Skoh had been thrown off onto the highway.

But no, there he was, climbing the revetment on the far side of the arterial.

Carl threw himself into the air, rolled as he crunched onto the roof of a cab, and got up. Another vault got him onto the back end of a cargo-8, and then he was at the revetment, clambering up the wall after Skoh.

Carl was in a frenzy, not even thinking. He was finding strength from somewhere, somewhere deep inside him.

It was an ugly strength. A dark, unpleasant force. But Carl Thonius didn't even stop to think about that. Below him, the traffic had begun to speed up again, engines racing. Carl scraped his way to the top of the six-metre revetment.

He looked up.

Skoh was standing over him on the top of the wall, looking down, one eye a bloody gouge.

Skoh grinned and stamped on Carl's hands.

Yelling out, Carl lost his grip and plunged down into the speeding traffic.

SKOH JUMPED DOWN off the revetment and limped along an unlit walkway, gasping for breath. There were streetlights ahead, he could see that with his remaining eye, and that meant a cab, or a transit station, maybe even a public vox post. Dazed, he tried to think. *Akunin*. How could he contact Akunin? Maybe the circus was the best bet. Or perhaps he should go straight to the top. The Ministry would protect him surely, given what he knew. Trice owed him.

He limped on.

A man came out of the shadows ahead of him. The man was smiling.

The man was Carl Thonius.

‘How... the hell did you...?’ Skoh began.

‘Truth be told, I don’t really know,’ Carl replied. Only it wasn’t his voice. It was a dry, rasping growl.

Skoh backed away. Carl’s eyes were glowing red from the inside, as if a lamp had been lit inside his skull.

‘Holy of holies,’ Skoh mumbled, backing away. ‘What are you?’

‘I’m not sure yet,’ the rasping voice replied, gusting like rotten air from Carl’s lips. The inner light had increased, shining out of Carl Thonius’s nostrils, mouth, eyes, and glowing through the skin of his face so that the shadows of the skull formations inside were visible like an x-ray plate.

‘But I know what you are,’ he said.

Carl raised his right hand. The flesh peeled back from the bones like melting wax, and the exposed finger bones extended into talons, long and thin and curved.

‘What you are is dead,’ Carl rasped.



NINETEEN

WE WERE LEAVING Strykson's mansion when the vox chimed. We'd been in there a few hours, probing him for everything he knew. Behind us, we left a man who had no idea what secrets he had just revealed. As far as Athen Strykson and his entire staff were concerned, he'd just had a nasty visit from the tax office.

'Yes?' I answered.

'We need you here,' Frauka replied.

Through Mathuin's eyes, I looked at Kys and Nayl. 'Got to go. Get back safe.'

They nodded. As soon as I had left him, they led the slightly woozy Mathuin up the hill to the rented flier parked behind the trees.

'WHAT HAPPENED?' I asked, resuming control of my chair.

'There was an incident,' Frauka replied lightly. 'I'd taken the boy to a gallery, like you suggested. An exhibit of the later Remembrancers, quite beautiful work, if a little—'

'Wystan. The point'

He shrugged. 'We got back. Skoh had escaped.'

'How?'

'It seems Doctor Belknap's liniment afforded him the opportunity to slip his cuffs. He overpowered Carl. Kara went after him, but she hurt herself.'

'Is she all right?'

'Belknap's with her now. Carl continued the pursuit. It would appear he killed Skoh.'

I swung my chair around. 'Look after Zael, please. Distract him.'

'All right,' Frauka answered. 'How did it go with Strykson?'

‘Fine. The others are on their way back now. I’ll fill in the details later.’

I floated down the hall and entered the front lounge. Carl was sitting there on an armchair, gazing into space. I tried briefly to read him, but his mind was impenetrable. Shock I supposed.

‘Carl? What happened?’

‘Skoh got out sir,’ he said, getting to his feet. His face was split and bruised. His clothes were torn and soaked with blood. ‘I gave chase. I knew we couldn’t let him get away.’

‘That would have been bad,’ I conceded. ‘So, you killed him?’

He looked at me sharply. ‘No. No, no. I didn’t. I chased him. We fought. He tried to climb the fence beside the arterial. And he fell. Went under the wheels of a cargo-10. It was... instantaneous.’

I sighed. ‘Better that, I suppose...’ I began. ‘Better that than he’d got away. Are you all right?’

‘A little dinged up. That happens, right?’

‘Yes. Go and get yourself cleaned up, Carl. Get Belknap to look at your face.’

He nodded. ‘What happens next?’ he asked me.

‘We know what they’re doing. We just don’t know why. As of tomorrow, we switch to infiltration. Kys and Harlon will be going in. To find out what this is actually about.’

‘What they want the data engines for?’

‘Exactly, Carl. Exactly that.’

‘I see,’ he said. He paused. ‘About Skoh, I’m really sorry—’

‘Don’t be,’ I said. ‘Our cover’s still intact. That’s the main thing. If our enemy had found out we were still alive and operating here, infiltration would be suicide. Thanks to you, we’re still covert. You should feel good about yourself.’

‘I do,’ he said.

‘Fine,’ I replied. ‘As long as we’re still invisible, we can do this.’

IN HIS PRIVATE suite at the Petropolitan, Shipmaster Akunin put down his glass and sat back, listening to the neotropical songbugs chirruping in their cages.

Akunin was a short, bulky man with a crown of white hair around his bald pate. He wore black robes with red buttons. Traces of digita inlay spread across his jaw.

An aide entered the room.

‘Well?’ Akunin asked.

‘It seems that whatever happened this afternoon at Master Strykson’s house was a false alarm.’

‘Really?’

‘I’m waiting for details, but it seems he was visited by the tariff revenue. A legitimate visit.’

Akunin sipped his drink. ‘They shouldn’t be investigating him. Trice assured us that our cartel would be immune from...’

He looked at his aide. ‘Yet more grounds for complaint. After Tchaikov, this petty insolence. Send to Trice. Repeat that I need to see him personally. Insist, please. I won’t be brushed off any more. This is getting out of hand.’

The aide nodded. ‘Also, sir, there is a Master Siskind here to see you.’

Akunin rose. ‘Let him in.’

Bartol Siskind walked into the grand apartment, glancing around. With his shaggy red hair and glass jacket, he looked out of place and uncomfortable amongst the trappings of high living.

‘Siskind,’ Akunin said, offering a hand. ‘This is unexpected.’

Siskind took the hand. ‘Master. Thank you for seeing me.’

‘Will you sit?’

‘Thank you.’

‘I had thought to see you at the Reach last year. Your cousin suggested you might be ready to join with us.’

‘I was delayed, unavoidably.’

‘But you’re here now.’

‘Indeed,’ said Siskind. ‘Master Akunin, when did you last hear from my cousin, Master Thekla?’

‘Not since Firetide,’ Akunin said. ‘He was conducting a little business for us there at Bonner’s Reach. I imagine he’ll be lying low for a while, though I expect him to join me here in the next few weeks. He backs your interests, you know. He’s very keen for you to join the cartel.’

‘So am I,’ said Siskind.

Akunin smiled. ‘I take it that’s why you’re here. To buy in?’

‘Yes, master. I’m here to join the cartel. The opportunity to make a lot of money. My ship is at the cartel’s disposal.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ Akunin said, leaning forward to feed one of the songbugs some seeds through the delicate bars of its cage. ‘Well, let’s get the business over with. Then I’ll treat you to dinner at Lavochey’s. It’s a ritual the cartel has. First, though. A simple matter.’

‘You mean the buy-in price?’ said Siskind.

‘Indeed I do. Three-quarters of a million crowns. A bond will do, or a bank testament.’

‘I don’t have it.’

‘A bond?’

‘No, I mean I don’t have three-quarters of a million to give you.’

Akunin frowned. ‘Then this meeting is over, Master Siskind. Thekla made you aware of the details, didn’t he?’

‘When did you last see Thekla?’ Siskind repeated.

‘This meeting is over,’ Akunin spat. ‘Go away and stop bothering me with your—’

‘Thekla’s dead.’

Akunin dropped the last of the grains onto the table, and brushed his hands. He looked round at Siskind. ‘What?’

‘I can’t be sure,’ said Siskind, ‘but I believe my cousin is dead, and the *Oktober Country* lost. At Bonner’s Reach, you sent him to trap and destroy

an Imperial inquisitor. Gideon Ravenor. Am I right?’

‘Go on, sir.’

‘Ravenor had got too close. He was sniffing around the Contract Thirteen cartel, pretty much on to you. So you lured him into Lucky Space to dispose of him out where no one would care or notice.’

‘I won’t confirm or deny,’ Akunin said. ‘But I think you’ve said enough. I thought you had come to see me to buy in to the cartel.’

‘I have,’ said Siskind. ‘I don’t have the cash, but I have something just as valuable. A place in the cartel, that’s my asking price.’

Akunin thought for a moment. ‘Very well. But it had better be good. If you’re trying to play me, Siskind, I’ll have you thrown from an airgate into hard vacuum.’

‘Thekla always said you were a mean bastard to deal with,’ Siskind got up and gestured towards the door.

Lucius Worna walked in, his armour grating as he moved. He was carrying a bundle in one hand.

‘This is your price?’ asked Akunin. ‘This bounty hunter scum?’

‘No,’ Worna boomed. He dropped the bundle onto the floor. ‘*This* is the price.’

The bundle stirred and uncoiled. Bloody, bruised and torn, Sholto Unwerth slowly raised his head and looked at Akunin.

‘I know this wretch. Unwerth,’ Akunin said.

‘Indeed,’ said Siskind. ‘Sholto, tell the nice man what you told me. What was the name of the passenger you brought from Bonner’s Reach and delivered here, to Eustis Majoris, about a week ago?’

Unwerth mumbled something.

‘Speak up!’ Worna growled, kicking him.

‘In all appraisal,’ whispered Sholto Unwerth, ‘his name was Ravenor.’

PART TWO

INTERIOR CASES



ONE

A TIDE OF trudging people, millions strong, flowed into the inner formals of Petropolis. From the air, they created a steady-rushing river delta in the surface level streets, a web of tributaries and streams feeding main estuaries. The tide sobbed out from rail terminals and transit stops, or welled up from lower sink levels like dark water from secret underground springs. In the open streets, the tide moved under a skin of nodding gamps and parasols. In the covered walkways, it ran like ink.

Few people spoke. There was no clamour of voices. Just the tramp of feet, the hollow booming of tannoy announcements, the cries of gampers and food-vendors touting for business.

Pale-faced, this was a multitude starved of sunlight and drained of expression. Dark eyes, tinted goggles, suits and robes of emerald, black or grey, the regulation colours of the clerical workforce. Ocular augmetics here and there, skin-plugs and neuro-link spinal ports, mechanical braces perched like brass spiders on hands deformed and crooked by carpal tunnel syndrome. Ear-jacks for transcribers and stenographers, vox-grafts in the mouths or throats of dictators and transcriptors. Wheezing quadrupedal walking frames, their stilt-legs folded, for the archivists and filing officers who worked amid the towering shelves of the index vaults. Almost four hundred thousand allergies to paper, dust, ink, or all three. Nearly two thousand undiagnosed malignancies to face, brain or throat from excessive exposure to screen radiation.

All of them moving in the same direction, into the vast towers of the Administry.

And I was watching just three of them.

THE CARRIAGES JOLTED to a halt and the automated doors rattled open, disgorging another cohort of Administry workers to swell the tramping tide. As soon as it was empty, the rail transit would close its doors and clatter off into the airless ducts of the sink levels to pick up workers of the Administry night shift, who were currently leaking out of the tower's basement exits in equal numbers to the day workers flowing in on the surface. The various departments of the Administry never slept. The cogitators ran all day and all night, chattering and processing.

There was Patience, in the midst of the crowd, moving with the flow. I saw her glance at her own reflection in the windows of the carriage, and felt her distaste. Her hair pinned up, no make-up except for some shadowing around the eyes to give her a hollow, sleep-deprived look, a unisex suit of cheap, black linen and an emerald jacket. Just another scribe, another clerk, another Administry drone.

The swollen crowd pushed out along a dank rockcrete concourse, past black iron railings and down a wide flight of stone steps out of the transit station. The lips of the stone steps had been smoothed and worn down by decades of footsteps, so they looked soft and indented like unplumped pillows. Through the station arch, under the copper eagle suspended from the glass roof, into the street, into the main flowing bustle. Patience was nudged several times by the press. If I stop walking, she thought, the pressure of bodies will lift me off my feet and carry me along like driftwood.

The street was covered by an ironwork rain-shield, but she could smell the raw acid wetness in the air outside. Overhead, tannoy horns were crackling out inspirational mottos. There was an unappetising odour of cooked onions and fatty meat coming from the barrow ovens of the curbside vendors. The massive ouslite tower of Administry Hall Three rose up ahead like a ziggurat, dim and hazy in the morning smog.

Patience eventually reached the mouth of the entrance hall, a yawning maw ten metres high, like the door of an ancient tomb. The graven visage of the God-Emperor glared down at the workers from the overmantle. No

one looked up, but every worker raised his or her hands to make the sign of the aquila as they passed beneath.

Inside the stone hallway, the massed footsteps echoed like rain. The flow of workers began to subdivide into the warren of side corridors and passages, heading for their appointed stations and departments. More instructions rang from the ceiling speakers. Patience saw PDF guards watching over various junctions, weapons slung, but they were not checking papers. Wall-mounted optic scanners at each doorway or hall-mouth read every worker permit that passed through, marking each one with a flashbulb flicker and a tonal ping, logging them into the system.

Patience saw the brief flash as her own permit was read. She began following the indicator signs for D:G/F1.

The tide began to thin out. The hallways had once been carpeted, but the pile had been eroded back to frayed matting like the bed of a dry stream. The air smelled of dry dust and static, and the photovoltaic lamps cast everything in a tobacco-coloured stain. She passed by the doorways of large cogitation chambers, glimpsed the endless rows of clerks at stations, heard the seamless clattering sound of ten thousand fingers striking keys.

In the hallway, quill servitors scuttled past, copy boys ran through carrying despatch boxes, gaggles of scribes hurried to meetings with transliterators and cipherists, gatherers pushed their heavily-laden basket trolleys, tech adepts shuffled along, hefting tool crates, heading for the latest repair. The walls were lined with the twisting branching tubes of the pneumatic despatch system. Every few seconds, there was a burp of air as another message cylinder rushed past inside one of the tubes.

Patience arrived at the entrance to department G/F1. The optic scanner flash-pinged her again as she entered, and a hololithic sign lit up with the words *WAIT HERE*.

She waited. Beyond the doorway, she could see the huge chamber, high-ceilinged, gloomy, lit by the enormous hololithic display screen at the far end, swirling with green data-forms, and by the rows of individual desk lights on the scribe stations. There were at least a dozen rows, an aisle

between each, and Patience counted something in the order of a hundred stations in each.

There was a cacophony of rattling keys. Copy boys and gatherers moved up and down the aisles, delivering and collecting files. Servo-skulls drifted down the aisles like bees hunting pollen.

+Throne. I'll go mad in a place like this.+

+The beating heart of the Imperium.+ I sent back.+But for the ceaseless work of the Administratum, civilisation as we know it would grind to a halt.+

+What, are you recruiting for them now?+

She looked round, back out into the hallway. In the wall directly opposite the department entrance was a shrine alcove where the blessed seniors of the Administratum performed the hourly rites to bless and favour the work of the scribes.

+That's odd, don't you think?+ she sent.

The alcove was dusty, as if it hadn't been used in a while. There was no water in the placatory dish, and the sheaves of herbs were limp and desiccated.

+I agree.+

'Junior Scribe Merit Yevins?'

Patience turned. An elderly female, an ordinate, approached. She was robed and hunched, her claw hands blue with ink-stain that would never wash out.

'Yes, ordinate.'

The woman held out a blue hand and took Patience's permit-slate.

'You are transferring from division six rubrication?'

'Yes, ordinate.'

'You have manual skill in excess of eighty norm?'

'Yes, ordinate.'

Junior Scribe Merit Yevins had died in a road traffic accident three days before. Carl had scooped her records from the Informium and grafted them

to provide Kys with a genuine Administtry background.

‘Follow me.’

The ordinate led Patience down one of the aisles. Pale-faced scribes hunched at their cogitators, gazing at their glowing yellow screens, their hands fluttering over the metal keyboards or turning the pages of the documents clamped in their articulated reading stands. Patience had to watch her step to avoid tripping on the cables and trunking that spilled out across the floor. The ordinate seemed to know where they all were without looking.

The old woman gestured to an empty cogitator station.

‘Begin here,’ she said. She waved a gatherer over, rifled through the alphabetised files in his cart, and took out a bulging sheaf of crumbling documents.

She handed them to Kys. ‘Transcription,’ she said. ‘Destination database is K8456 decimal. What is the destination database?’

‘K8456 decimal, ordinate,’ Patience replied.

‘Begin.’

The ordinate limped away. Patience sat down at the station and woke the cogitator. It mumbled and shuddered as it warmed up, the valve screen slowly glowing into resolution. It scrolled data noise for a moment, then opened to display an entry gate and invited her to type in her serial code and destination database.

She did so. The screen trembled again, and the optical display closed like a flower then reopened to reveal a new file ready for transcription.

By then, Patience had arranged the sheaf of papers on her reading stand, open at sheet one. She secured it around the corners with some of the old rubber bands dangling off the lip of the frame. Carl had briefed them well on basic clerical habits. She even slipped on the plastek thimble that aided page-turning.

+Here we go.+ she sent.

She started typing.

It was copying by rote. The figures in the document had no meaning she could discern.

After a few minutes, she reached her left hand into the pocket of her coat. The little analyser Carl had given her was there. With her fingers, she played out its tiny plug-wire and, with the analyser still out of sight in her pocket, brought the wire end up onto the station and plugged it into one of the spare data-ports on her cogitator.

+Getting that?+

+Carl's getting a signal now, thank you. He says you're operating a late model K-phyber cogitation engine with numerical reinforcement sub frames.+

+The stuff he knows.+ Kys sent back, and carried on typing.

'I THOUGHT YOU'D done this before?' said Gatherer Lerally with a sneer. Like all the gatherers, he was a big man with heavily muscled arms and shoulders well displayed by his black singlet.

'I have,' said Nayl. 'But it was a different system in collect-distribute where I worked. We had to number the files on a docket before we put them in the cart.'

'Well, that just wastes time,' Lerally sighed. He pointed to the data-slate in Nayl's hand. 'Your numbers come up there, file and destination, and you wait for the matching serials to flick up on the boards. Then you gather from the bench, swipe each file past your cart scanner, and it's all logged. See? Simple. I don't know how they did things at your old place, Tulliver.'

Nayl shrugged. He had no idea how they'd done things at Bernod Tulliver's old place either. Bernod Tulliver had been stabbed to death in an undersink mugging the month before, and, courtesy of Carl, Nayl was just borrowing his credentials.

Right now, he was standing in the bowels of Administry Hall Three. It was hot, furnace-hot, thanks to the steam from the hydraulic hoists. Queues of brawny gatherers, each one with a cart, were assembled in front of the benches, watching the overhead hololiths. As numbers flickered up,

gatherers moved forward to the benches to collect their cargoes from the robed coordinators. Behind the benches, the enormous cage-lifts brought up file cartons from the basement archives in clouds of vapour.

‘I’ll walk you through one,’ Lerally said. He was a gatherer supervisor, and wore the medal proudly.

‘Thanks,’ said Nayl.

More numbers flashed up on the overhead boards.

‘That’s you,’ Lerally said.

Nayl pushed his cart forward. It had a twisted castor and it fought to go the other way. Nayl winced as the strain pulled at his damaged arm.

‘What’s the matter with your arm?’ Lerally asked.

‘Nothing. Fricking wonky wheel.’

‘Get used to it,’ Lerally said unhelpfully. ‘Once you’ve been here a while, you’ll get a better cart. Perks of seniority.’

‘How long is “a while”?’

Lerally shrugged. ‘Ten, maybe twelve years. Hurry up. You never keep the co-ordinators waiting.’

Nayl slewed his cart up to the bench and showed the co-ordinator his slate. The robed man turned and hefted a bulging carton of papers from the cage-lifts.

‘Now swipe them off,’ Lerally said.

Nayl took each file out of the carton and waved them in turn past the optical reader built into his cart. The dial kept blinking up ‘*unknown*’.

‘Frick’s sake, Tulliver,’ Lerally exclaimed. He licked his thumb and rubbed the wet end vigorously across the glass lens of the reader. ‘Dust builds up. It’s the static. Try it again.’

Nayl swiped the files again, and the dial snapped up code numbers. Once his cart was full, Nayl slid the empty carton back to the co-ordinator, who slung it back onto the cage-lift.

‘Okay,’ said Lerally. ‘Now you deliver. Check off the codes against your slate and use the department map. You’ll soon find your way around.’

Nayl nodded and swung his heavy cart towards the elevator bank. He glanced at his slate: P/S4. That was on the fifty-seventh floor. The way his cart was bucking and pulling wide, he'd never even reach the lifts.

'Holy Throne,' he whispered.

+Stick with it, Harlon.+

'Easy for you to say, boss. I'd rather be doing something less demanding.'

+Like what?+

'I dunno. Killing someone you don't like?'

+ARE YOU SURE you're up to this?+

'Will you leave it alone? I'm fine. I want to do this. I want to be doing something. Belknap said I was fit, didn't he?'

+Yes. Though I got the distinct impression he wasn't telling me something.+

Kara Swole stiffened. 'Like what?'

+I don't know. I didn't probe his mind. I respect doctor-patient confidentiality. I just got the impression he'd given you a clean bill of health because you'd told him to.+

'Gideon, I don't intend to sit this one out, all right? This is a serious deal, and you need all the help you can get. So I'm helping. I'd rather be doing that than sitting in that lumpy bed in Miserimus.'

+Is it really that lumpy?+

'Oh, yes.'

+And your wound? It's stable? It's only been a few days since you tore it open chasing Skoh.+

'It's fine. Now go away. I'm trying to blend here.'

'Weena Carvort, what are you doing?'

Kara looked up at her supervisor, a dainty little man with augmetic eyes. His name was Beedron Halicut. Ordinate Ordinary Beedron Halicut.

'I'm loading the tubes,' she replied. In truth, her answer should have been. 'I'm perched on an uncomfortable metal stool, nursing an aching

belly-wound and the grim intimations of my own mortality, jamming numbered message cylinders into the spout ends of pneumatic tubes in the sweaty basements of Administry Hall Three, all the while pretending to be someone who perished from tubercolic fever in an Ecclesiarchy hospice ten days ago.'

But that, naturally, would lose her the job.

'You might think you're loading the tubes,' said Ordinate Ordinary Halicut, 'but I believe you are inserting the cylinders upside down.'

'Oh!' Kara said. She looked at the plastek cylinder in her hand and slowly upturned it. 'Sorry.'

'I thought you were skilled?' Halicut said sharply.

'Just confused, sir,' Kara replied. 'By the new system. On Caxton we loaded them plug-end first.'

'Well, Carvort, you're not on Caxton now,' Halicut moved away to berate another tube-loader.

The pneumatic tube despatch hall was a massive room in the sink-levels of the tower. Like stalactites, festoons of tube pipes fed down into the room, curving slightly to deliver the cylinders into rows of wire racks. They looked like inverted church organs. Schools of operators sat at the ends of the racks, sorting the cylinders that arrived with a burp of air, loading new ones into the ascender pipes. Newly-arrived cylinders were opened and their contents filed into cartons for the gatherers to wheel away. Fresh files came in to be wound into scrolls, cylindered, and sent on their upward journeys.

The air pressure in the chamber kept popping and changing as the tubes barked and spat their loads.

Kara glanced at the stack of papers she had just been given by a gatherer. It was just meaningless data, reams of figures. She wound it up tight, slid it into a tube, and pressure-fired it on its way.

IN MISERIMUS HOUSE, I relaxed for a moment. Nearby, Frauka was playing regicide with Zael. He'd finally got the boy to understand the rudiments of

the game. Zeph was prowling the grounds, checking the sensors. Carl was at his station, watching the first links show up from Kara, Kys and Nayl. 'I'm getting a decent feed from Patience now,' he reported. 'I just...'

'What?' I asked.

Carl frowned. 'I can't figure out what they've got her doing. The data she's processing makes no sense. Just random series of characters and numerals without context. Maybe it's a cipher. Give me a while, and I'll see if I can crack it.'

'I have complete faith in you, Carl,' I said.

We were in now, really inside the heart of the mystery. I remember thinking that, feeling the satisfaction of it.

How wrong I was.

SHIPMASTER AKUNIN HAD taken a late luncheon at a private club in the high-stacks of Formal C, then travelled back to the Petropolitan in a hired limousine. He was edgy, and his mood did not improve when he reached his suite.

'Anything?' he asked his aide.

'Still no response, sir,' the man replied.

Akunin cursed quietly. 'If there's nothing by this evening, I'll send another message.'

The aide nodded. 'Master Siskind is here to see you.'

Pulling off his blue satin coat, Akunin went into the lounge. Siskind was sitting in one of the low armchairs.

'Siskind,' Akunin said by way of hello. He crossed directly to the sideboard and poured himself an amasec. 'Still nothing from Trice. Can you believe that? My messages are as emphatic as possible, and he deigns to ignore me. Drink?'

Siskind shook his head.

Akunin sipped his drink, pacing. The neotropical song-bugs, sensing his demeanour, had fallen silent. 'The arrogance of the man!' Akunin spat. 'Without the cartel's work, he'd be nothing!'

Siskind nodded gently.

‘Another hour or two, and I’ll send to him again,’ Akunin growled. ‘I’ve half a mind to go to him in person, see how he likes that—’

Akunin’s personal hand-vox chimed and he took it out of his pocket.

‘One moment,’ he said to Siskind, and raised the device to his ear. ‘Akunin?’

‘Just calling to see if our employer had answered yet,’ said a voice.

‘Who is this?’ Akunin asked.

‘It’s Siskind. I was just—’

Akunin lowered the communicator and turned to stare at the man sitting opposite him.

‘Siskind’ got to his feet. He seemed to ripple, to shimmer, as if the image of Bartol Siskind was just a reflection in a disturbed pool. Then the ripple stilled itself again and Akunin was staring at a mirror image of himself.

‘Oh Terra,’ Akunin gasped and started to run, dropping his glass and his hand-vox. His double caught up with him before he’d taken three steps, and seized him. Arms pinned, Akunin crashed forward against the sideboard.

‘Please! Please!’ he squealed. The grip constricting him grew tighter.

‘Sire Trice is happy not,’ the double lisped, sliding a long, slim serrated blade out of its cuff.

‘Oh no! Please!’

‘Let him go, Monicker,’ said a voice from the doorway.

‘Akunin’ stepped back and let the real Akunin slump to his knees.

Toros Revoke padded into the room, his stale yellow eyes showing amusement.

‘Get up, Akunin,’ he said.

Trembling, Akunin did as he was told. In all his dealings with the Secretists on behalf of the cartel, Akunin had never found Revoke anything less than terrifying.

‘You seem to have taken it upon yourself to become a nuisance,’ Revoke said. ‘What’s the matter with you, shipmaster? All these pleading demands for a meeting.’

Akunin eyed the secretist warily. ‘I think what I’ve got to say is important.’

‘So... I’m here now. Say it.’

‘Not to you. I need to speak with Trice, a personal meeting—’ Akunin began.

Revoke raised a finger to his lips. ‘First of all, it’s *Chief Provost* Trice. Second, the remit of Contract Thirteen states clearly that you of the cartel and the chief provost should not be seen together, nor have direct dealings, nor any connection be apparent between such parties. Third, something tried to kill the chief provost the other day. We’ve been a little busy since then trying to discover what it was and who sent it. In comparison, you and your pathetic mewlings are a very, very low priority.’

‘I know! Please, I know that! This—’

‘I could have you killed,’ Revoke said bluntly. ‘I could have Monicker here do it. She’s very good.’

Akunin glanced nervously at his double, but it wasn’t his double any more. It was hardly anything. A woman, vaguely, a hazy blur in the air that light seemed to ignore.

‘What is she?’ Akunin asked.

‘Monicker? She’s a dissembler. They’re very rare. It’s a form of albinism, an extreme mutation form. A dissembler’s pigmentation is so shockingly absent, they act as living mirrors, reflecting back likenesses. It’s very useful. Monicker observed your friend Siskind when he visited you earlier today, and mirrored him. Oh, Master Akunin, the look on your face.’

‘You’ve been observing me?’

‘Of course we have,’ Revoke replied. ‘The fuss you’re making. This unseemly frenzy to meet with the chief provost. It’s just not on, Akunin. Not on at all. The provost is furious with you.’

‘Of that, I have no doubt,’ Akunin said, recovering his composure a little. ‘He runs a subsector. I run a ship. I am small fry. I understand that. Me, the other shipmasters under contract, we are just pawns in his great theatre. We do the grunt work, get paid – well paid, I’m under no illusions. We are supposed to get on with our job and be invisible.’

‘Well, you seem to appreciate it quite clearly,’ said Revoke. ‘It begs the question...’

Akunin looked Revoke in the face. ‘I have been insisting on a meeting because I know something that may well be directly connected to the attempt on the chief provost’s life. We have a mutual problem. The entire venture is in jeopardy.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Gideon Ravenor is still alive. And I have reason to believe he is here on Eustis Majoris.’

Toros Revoke stared at Akunin for a long moment. ‘Do you have proof?’

‘Yes.’

‘Bring it with you. Now.’



TWO

IT WAS THE third time she'd called that morning. The switchboard put her through, but all she got was an autovox invitation to record a message. For the third time, she didn't.

The town-hab was quiet, just the ticking of the numerous chrons and horologs her uncle had collected over the years. Maud Plyton paced around the gloomy house, agitated and anxious.

She froze when she heard the music. A sudden, four-finger chord, then a rill and a sprightly refrain. It was coming from the drawing room.

Uncle Valeryn was seated at the spinet, playing one of Steramon's *bagatelles* from memory. Plyton stood in the doorway and watched him, her eyes welling up. Every few weeks, her uncle would do this. Like the sun passing out from behind a cloud, his lucidity would briefly return, and he'd play. Then the clouds would return. The patches of lucidity were becoming more infrequent these days.

Valeryn stopped playing. 'Enid?' he called. Enid was the private nurse, and she wasn't due in until three.

'No, it's me, Uncle Vally,' Plyton said, entering the room. 'Don't stop playing.'

Valeryn tinkled a few more notes and stopped again. He reached out and took his niece's hand, squeezing it.

'Maud. I thought you were Enid,' he said.

'No, it's me,' Plyton said, knowing her uncle would drift away at any moment.

'How are things with you?' he asked.

'Problems,' she said.

'What sort?' Valeryn replied. 'Magistratum matters, no doubt?'

She smiled sadly. ‘Yes, Uncle Vally. Department troubles. You don’t want to hear about them.’

‘Don’t I?’ he said, and let go of her hand. He played a series of plangent chords. ‘It’s out of tune,’ he said. ‘There, the upper D, a little flat,’ He struck the note repeatedly. ‘I don’t play this very much now, do I?’

‘Not as much as you used to,’ she said.

Valeryn looked up at her. His face was in shadow. ‘I know, Maud,’ he said. ‘Vally?’

‘I know. Moments like this, I know how I am. Fading. Not always there. There are blanks. These long... intermissions. I don’t remember. It’s very frustrating. I know you’re a Magistratum officer. I know you’ve been living here with me for some time. But I have no idea how old you are or what happened yesterday. I know I have a nurse. Enid, right? So if I have a nurse, I must be ill.’

‘Uncle...’

‘It’s very frustrating. Very frustrating,’ He fell silent. Then he started and looked up at her again. ‘What was I just saying, Enid?’

‘Maud, Uncle Vally. It’s Maud.’

‘Oh, yes. Silly old me. Maud. My, how you’ve grown. How are things with you? Have you got a job, my dear? A man on the go?’

Plyton sighed. ‘Uncle Vally? I’ve got to go out for a while. Enid will be here in another hour or so. Will you be all right?’

‘Enid?’

‘The nurse?’

‘Oh, her. Yes. Yes, I’ll be all right.’

Plyton walked back towards the door, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. The spinet behind her rang out suddenly. A Kronikar *valse*.

‘Uncle Vally?’

‘I remember,’ he said, without looking round. ‘So much and so little. It’s very hard. The only thing I know for sure is that, when the moments of clarity come, use them. Like now. I don’t know if I’ll ever play again, so I

better play now. Use the moment. Seize the moment. You never know how dark it's going to get otherwise.'

'Good advice, Uncle Vally,' she said.

'I thought so,' he said. 'Do what you can, while you still can. Otherwise...'

She looked back. The music had paused.

'Uncle?'

'The upper D there. A little flat, wouldn't you say?' He tapped at it. 'A little flat, isn't it, Enid? A little flat?'

'Yes, Uncle Valeryn,' Plyton said. She could hear him striking the note over and over as she left the hab and headed for the rail transit.

'OH. IT'S YOU,' said Limbwall, opening the door.

'Yes. Hello,' Plyton said. 'Nice gown there. Are you going to let me in?'

'What are you doing here?' Limbwall said, gathering his shabby housecoat around him self-consciously.

'I rode the transit all the way to E to see you. Can I come in?'

Limbwall hesitated, then reluctantly let her inside his cramped little hab. His face showed the ugly bruises that the fists of the Interior Cases marshals had left on it two days before. He looked scared.

'What do you want?' he asked, attempting to tidy up the clutter in his bedsit.

'Just thought I'd hang out with a work colleague,' Plyton said.

'You've never hung out with me.'

'No, I haven't. Sorry, that was a lie. I wanted to talk to someone.'

'About what?' he replied.

She stared at him with 'What the hell do you think?' eyes.

Limbwall shrugged. 'I think you should go, Plyton. I don't think we're meant to be speaking to each other. Rickens told us to go back to our habs and wait there to be questioned.'

'Have you been questioned, Limbwall?'

He shook his head. 'No, but the Interior Cases investigation wi—'

Plyton scowled. 'Screw that. Screw them. It shouldn't work this way,' She paused. 'I tried to contact Rickens.'

Limbwall blinked at her, his eyes wide. 'You did?'

'Yes. At the department. I don't have a private contact for him. He's... unavailable,' Plyton looked back at him. 'Since when was Rickens unavailable to his own staff?'

'Since we all got suspended?' Limbwall suggested archly.

'But you've got a link. Here. You told me.'

Limbwall sighed. 'That was a secret.'

'I know. And they seem to be very popular in the city right now. You told me you'd enhanced your personal cogitator with department codes to keep up with the workload. Limbwall, I think we need to use it. We need to know what's going on.'

'I think we should leave it the hell alone,' he said. 'That's what I think. I think if we start meddling, we'll end up in trouble.'

'Look what they did to your face, Limbwall. We're already there.'

'START WITH RICKENS. Blanket search.'

Crouched in front of the battered second-hand cogitator set up in the corner of his hab, Limbwall thumped the keys.

'Service record. Yeah, nothing else. Says he's on extended leave and directs all enquiries to Interior Cases.'

'All right, scrub that. The Aulsman Case. Call it up,' Plyton read out the case file number.

'There's no such case listed. Nothing, Plyton.'

'Not even as closed or restricted?'

'Seriously, nothing.'

Plyton folded her arms and stared at the floor. 'I opened the case file myself the day Aulsman's body was found. All my scene of crime notes, the pics I took. They've removed it all and erased the traces.'

‘Magistratum files don’t just get erased,’ he scoffed.

‘Yes, they do,’ she replied. ‘I’ve seen it before.’

‘That’s nonsense,’ he replied, shaking his head. ‘Who has that kind of power?’

Plyton didn’t answer.

‘All right, try the names Whygott and Coober. Marshals, Interior Cases.’

Limbwall chattered the keys and then shook his head. ‘Nothing. No listing on personnel. Were they the two goons who got in your face at the old sacristy?’

‘Yes. Now search for Yrnwood. The limner who witnessed Aulsman’s death.’

Limbwall tapped at his keys.

‘Mmm... nothing. Nothing in Magistratum. Nothing in civic records either. Was it a false ident?’

‘No, he checked out at the time. Run it through the Informium data-core.’

‘I did. There’s nothing.’

‘Holy Throne. They’re hiding everything!’

Limbwall turned to look at her. ‘Who’s “they”, Plyton?’

‘Someone with real power. We’re into subjects of a legitimate investigation, Limbwall. Even Interior Cases isn’t as brazen as this. Last time I saw Rickens, he told me the Aulsman Case was the key. We’d mishandled it somehow, and it was all connected to that assassination attempt on the chief provost. Well, I don’t think we mishandled it at all. I think we found something there in the sacristy, we just didn’t realise what it was.’

‘This... false ceiling you told me about?’

‘Maybe,’ She started buttoning her coat and headed for the door. ‘I’m going home. You pulled me that file on the old city plans. I’ll go and start working through it, see if I can’t find something we’ve missed. You stay here and stay in contact.’

‘Remind me: why are we doing this?’

She grinned. 'Because we serve at the pleasure of the God-Emperor. And because someone I love very much told me to seize the moment because you never know how dark it's going to get.'

THE SKY WAS turning to a dull undercast as night closed in. Plyton hurried along the pavement as the burn-alarms started to sing and the first spatters of rain started to fall. Too far to run in this. She ducked into the doorway arch of a town-hab to wait out the downpour, just a hundred metres from her uncle's house.

The rain began to stream down. From the cover of the sinks, the gamper-boys started to yell their trade. She waited. Her mind was ticking over, like one of her uncle's horologs.

Just a year before. In Rickens's office. The blanked case. 'No good will come if it,' Rickens had told her.

There was a sudden beating of wings. She looked up. A flock of sheen birds swirled up into the rain, turning like a shoal of fish, twisting east.

Something made her very uneasy suddenly.

A sixth sense. What Rickens liked to call the *Magistratum muscle*.

Ignoring the rain, Plyton ducked out of the archway and ran along the street to the hatchway of the parking garage. She knew her uncle's code and punched it in. The hatch opened. The attendant, the old man with the apron, waved at her as she walked inside. He knew her. She was the girl who came in to use the Bergman. The attendant wandered away. He was busy soaping up the bodywork of a crimson transporter owned by some local bigwig.

Plyton slipped through the rockcrete gloom, hugging the shadows. Rainwater was gnawing in between the garage's joints, pooling on the floor in pungent pools. There was the Bergman. Bay A9.

Plyton didn't have the keys. She peered in through the driver's door window. There was the folder Limbwall had given her, still tucked into the door pocket. She'd come back for that, once she'd got the keys from Uncle Vally. She walked round behind the automobile, and felt around the dank

back wall of the bay for the loose bricks. She kept an eye on the old attendant. He was still washing the crimson transporter.

Plyton lifted three of the soot-black bricks out.

The Tronsvasse 9 was where she'd hidden it, in the cavity, wrapped in vizzly-cloth. She had no permit for the weapon, but every Magistratum marshal owned a back-up piece. It went with the job. Service weapon and a concealed. You never knew when.

Plyton took it out. Heavy, chromed, rubberized grip. Ten in the clip, one in the spout. She eased the slide half-back, saw the glint of the chambered round, and slipped it back. Beside the weapon, two more fat clips.

Plyton put the clips in her pocket, slid the 9 into the waistband of her trousers and put the bricks back.

She waved at the attendant as she walked out of the garage.

THE FRONT DOOR of Uncle Valeryn's town-hab was ajar. Plyton pushed it wide. She could see immediately that something had happened here, something ghastly. It was as if an erosive force had spilled through the hallway, shredding the wall panels, abrading the carpet, demolishing all the furniture.

Plyton took the Tronsvasse out.

The door to the front parlour was half open. Plyton saw a scattered mess of red-bare bones loosely gathered in a torn blue dress. The shredded remains of a nurse's starched white headdress. Plyton swallowed hard. Uncle Vally. *Uncle Vally*.

Weapon braced, she edged along the hall. The place looked as if it had been sandblasted. The wallpaper was stripped, the floorboards scrubbed to bare, splintered wood. The oil paintings on the walls were just empty frames adorned by rags of canvas.

Plyton paused at the doorway of the drawing room and peered in.

Something bony and raw lay on the worn-down carpet in front of the spinet. The spinet itself looked furry. Its once-polished surface was chewed and splintered, the varnished wood pocked with a maelstrom of

tiny chips. The curtains were in tatters. Uncle Valeryn's notation folios were shredded.

A large, slender man was hunched over Uncle Vally's reduced corpse. Broad-shouldered, with a mane of wispy grey hair, he wore a suit of leather jack with an armoured sleeve.

Drax turned as he heard a sound behind him. His curiously wide face, with its small piggy eyes and a massive underbiting jaw blinked in surprise.

He rose and started to pull out the psyber-lure.

Plyton fired. Her first shot took off the left side of Drax's face. The second went through his chest and blew out his back. Drax slammed backwards into the ruined spinet, the half-slung lure wrapping around his body. His weight toppled the keyboard instrument over beneath him onto the floor with a discordant clash of strings and keys.

Her eyes burning, Maud Plyton took one last look at her uncle. She backed out of the room. In the litter of debris in the hall, she found fragments of the jar that had always stood on the shelf above the heater. Nearby, she found the Bergman's keys.

On the pavement outside, running now, she snatched out her hand-vox. 'Limbwall? Limbwall! It's Maud. Get out! Get out now!'



THREE

THE WEAPON-SERVITOR reared automatically as Revoke approached. It cycled up its gun-pods and played its pink recog-beam up and down his face. Its handler yanked at its leash and brought it to heel.

‘Sorry, sir,’ the handler said.

‘Don’t be,’ Revoke replied. ‘I admire vigilance. I was told he was here.’

‘Yes, sir. He’s inside. Please observe the drill.’

‘Of course,’ Revoke stepped past the handler and his chrome-plated cannon-hound and went over to the rack of bare metal drawers screwed to the stone wall. He slid out an empty drawer, and placed inside it his weapon, his hand-vox, his wallet, his chron and every other single item about his person that was either powered or bore writing, numerals or inscriptions of any sort. Then he closed the drawer and took down one of the blunting charms that hung from the row of hooks above the rack. As Revoke put it around his neck, he felt the pendant weight of the heavy lodestone against his chest. More particularly, he felt his precious psy stutter away into temporary exile.

Then he stepped into the airgate. All of the entrances to the Encompass Room were actual starship airgates, imported as brand new units from the yards at Ur-Haven in the Antimar sub. It seemed odd to pace down the cold stone hallways of the lord governor’s palace in Formal A and then step into a vacuum lock of brushed steel and recessed lumin panels.

The outer hatch closed. Revoke felt the prickly gust of the decontamination blowers and heard the vents suck the soot and dust away. Then the inner hatch opened.

To step from ancient fortress into an airgate was one thing. To step from an airgate into this was quite another.

Toros Revoke had been in the Encompass Room more than a dozen times before, but still it impressed him. Circular, over five hundred metres in diameter, it had been constructed from the uppermost four storeys of the palace. Revoke was actually stepping out onto a steel bridge walkway that extended out across the chamber two floors up in the air. The walkway met three others like it that sprouted from hatchways at the other compass points to form a platform above the centre of the room.

Above, the roof space was black, and out of the blackness powerful stab-lamps hung down on chains, like stars in the night sky. Below, the floor of the chamber was a brilliant white expanse like the surface of a sunward moon. This entire floor was patterned with a delicate tracery of black lines and other details, all of them too fine and small to be seen clearly from the bridge. But Revoke knew what the intricate pattern represented. He peered down and saw the small figures of the many geometricians on their knees, adding details to the pattern with their consecrated quills. Only a few small portions of the overall pattern still lacked any detail.

Revoke could see the chief provost standing up on the viewing platform. He hesitated when he realised that Trice was not alone. The Diadochoi was with him.

Trice saw Revoke and nodded for him to join them. Revoke approached with unease. The Diadochoi was spending an increasing amount of time in the Encompass Room of late, eagerly anticipating the culmination of the work.

The Diadochoi was tall and slender, dressed in simple black clothes. His head was bare and, in the Encompass Room, he chose not to wear his public face.

Revoke tried not to look at the Diadochoi's true visage. The contorted pink flesh, the features fused and melted down like candlewax after a long night.

'Revoke,' the Diadochoi gurgled liplessly. 'Come to me, my son.'

Revoke obeyed. The Diadochoi embraced him and kissed both his cheeks with the wet wound he called a mouth. Revoke could smell nidos and

unguent creams.

‘Jader tells me you saved him the other night,’ the Diadochoi lisped.

‘He did, lord?’ Trice said.

‘Against a beast from hell, I hear,’ the Diadochoi said, the heat-blackened stumps of his teeth showing against the pink as he smiled. ‘Any clue yet as to what it was?’

‘We are following some leads,’ Revoke replied.

‘Leave all that to us, lord,’ Trice cut in. ‘Do not trouble yourself with nothings. You must concentrate your mind on the true work.’

The Diadochoi nodded. He took Revoke by the arm and led him to the platform’s rail. ‘Isn’t it beautiful? Quite, quite beautiful. We have made adjustments just this last morning. Recalibrations, according to the refined axes. You see there, where the geometricians are erasing?’

Revoke looked and raised his hand to point. ‘You mean—’

The Diadochoi’s black-gloved hand caught hold of Revoke’s and squeezed it shut with nearly bone-crushing force.

‘Don’t point, Revoke. Not in here. Any gesture can be a signifier. You should know better.’

‘I’m sorry, lord.’

The Diadochoi let his hand go. ‘Where the geometricians are erasing, that is the angle of adjustment. Fate gives even as it seems to take away, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, lord.’

‘By morning, the new axial points will be inscribed. It’s all very... promising. Now, what did you want?’

‘I need a word with the chief provost,’ Revoke said.

‘A word,’ The Diadochoi made a wet, gurgling sound that approximated to a chuckle. ‘A word. In here. A word. You’re a witty man, Revoke.’

‘Am I, lord?’

The Diadochoi turned to Trice. ‘See to your business, Jader. I’ll be here when you return.’

Trice took Revoke by the arm and walked him away along the bridge to the airgate. Behind them, the Diadochoi was still peering down from the platform at the working scribes below.

The airgate hatch closed and the air-scrubbers whirled.

‘He seems in a good humour,’ Revoke said.

‘He is. We’re very close now, Toros. That chance discovery at the old sacristy the other day it’s the piece we’ve been missing. Now we’ve got it, everything is falling into perfect alignment, all our calculations and projections.’

‘The true centre?’

‘Just that. At last. It was no wonder that we couldn’t make things match up. No wonder, indeed, that everything we’d tried before didn’t work.’

‘So...’ said Revoke. ‘We’re close?’

‘Just a few days,’ Trice looked at him. ‘He scares you, doesn’t he?’

‘A little bit,’ Revoke admitted.

Jader Trice smiled as the other airgate hatch opened before them. ‘Be thankful. He scares me an awful lot more than that. So why have you come looking for me?’

They were retrieving their possessions from the rack of drawers. As soon as he took off his blunting charm, Revoke realised the guard nearby could hear them.

‘Not here. Let’s walk.’

‘RAVENOR. EMPTY GODS, are you sure?’

Revoke nodded. The shipmaster’s evidence is quite compelling.’

Trice sat down on one of the private suite’s sofas and wrung his hands as he thought. ‘Get me a drink. Amasec. Mollamot. Anything.’

Revoke went over to the cabinet and found a glass and a bottle of eighty year-old nepenthe. ‘If Ravenor is here, and active, it could explain the killing of the cartel’s banker.’

‘Tchaikov?’

‘Yes, and it could also explain the attack on you at the palace.’

‘You’ve still turned up nothing on that?’

Revoke handed his master the glass. ‘We know it was some form of incunabula, some slaved proto-daemon. A killing tool, directed by a psyker. I’ve had the psy-adept arm of the Secretists searching covertly since the attack, but in a hive this size, without wanting to show our hand...’

‘Would Ravenor use a daemon? I mean, really?’

Revoke shrugged. ‘We’ve studied his records through the Officio Inquisitorus Planetia. He’s known to be hardline, but his master was Eisenhorn. And you know what’s said about him.’

‘Even so,’ said Trice, sipping his drink. ‘You told me you’d killed the psyker operating that thing.’

‘I did. Most surely. His name was Saul Keener, a local black market psyker with prior form. Ravenor wouldn’t have been so impetuous as to slave the thing himself. He’d employ someone. He relies on his agents. Still, right at the end there, I sensed another mind. Ravenor himself, no doubt, looking in to see if the job had been done.’

‘Damn him!’ Trice spat. ‘The Diadochoi mustn’t be told. He’ll go mad.’

‘Of course.’

Jader Trice put his glass down and rose to his feet. He was agitated. ‘When that daemon-thing attacked us, I suspected this faction, that faction, this cult, that coven. All these years, so many accumulated enemies. The one thing I didn’t even begin to consider was Ravenor. He’s meant to be dead!’

‘Akunin has proof otherwise, sir.’

‘You’ve brought him here?’

Revoke nodded. ‘Under the circumstances, I thought I should.’ He got up and waved a control wand at the end wall of the suite. The entire wall became transparent so they could see out into the adjoining anteroom where Akunin waited nervously with his companions.

‘That’s Akunin there?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘The other man?’

‘His name is Siskind. Another shipmaster. An interesting man.’

‘And the big brute with him?’

‘A bounty hunter called Worna. Just paid muscle.’

‘What about that... that runty thing at his feet?’

‘The runty thing goes by the name of Sholto Unwerth, sir. Yet another shipmaster. More particularly, the proof.’

Trice looked at Revoke. ‘What do you make of Akunin?’

‘Scared. Scared of us, and scared that, with Thekla dead, he’s now got seniority in the cartel. I can sense he wants out, but only if he gets a massive pay-off to keep him quiet. He sees this evidence about Ravenor as his get-out clause.’

‘Does he indeed? What about this other one? Siskind. You said he was interesting.’

Revoke smiled. ‘Master Siskind reads as ambitious. He’s an associate of Thekla’s who wanted to become part of the Contract Thirteen cartel... except that he didn’t have the funds to buy in. He’s done all the hard work here, sir. He was the one who realised Thekla was missing. He hired Worna to track Ravenor to Eustis Majoris, and brought that proof to Akunin as collateral to buy into the cartel.’

Trice straightened his gold-hemmed robes and put on his game face. ‘This Siskind sounds like my kind of bastard. What about the bounty-grant?’

‘Does what he does for cash.’

Trice turned to Revoke. ‘Let’s go and talk to them,’ he said.

THE MEN ROSE as Trice and Revoke entered the room, all except Unwerth, who was curled up in a bloodied ball in kicking-reach of Lucius Worna.

‘Master Akunin!’ Trice announced, hurrying forward and clasping the man by the hands. ‘A thousand apologies for ignoring your many calls! I have been so busy these last few days!’

‘No apologies necessary, chief provost,’ Akunin nodded.

‘No, I must. Revoke here treated you most shamefully. Apologise, Revoke.’

‘I beg the shipmaster’s forgiveness.’

Akunin nodded. ‘There’s no need, chief provost. I only wish to serve. I have brought this piece of scum to your attention. Proof that Inquisitor Ravenor moves against us both. His name is Unwerth. He brought Ravenor here.’

‘Is this true? Is Ravenor here on this world?’ Trice asked.

Unwerth mumbled something and then yelped as Worna kicked him.

‘So, Ravenor, Ravenor,’ Trice sighed, seating himself. ‘The cartel slipped up there, didn’t it?’

Akunin sat down facing the chief provost. ‘Thekla may have been overconfident, sir—’

‘Overconfident? He promised to trap and kill Ravenor for me, and yet Ravenor is alive and Thekla is dead. Overconfident is hardly the word.’

Akunin cleared his throat. ‘Which is why I have come here with this evidence, sir.’

Trice grinned broadly. ‘And for that, I thank you. How will the cartel pay?’

‘Pay, sir? For what?’

‘For messing up. For failing to complete the task I set them?’

Akunin cleared his throat for a second time and sat forward. ‘I’m not sure what you mean, chief provost. Thekla failed you. Him and the agents you sent to help him. They bungled the mission. I’m just here to—’

Trice put his finger to his lips pensively and looked at the ceiling. ‘A moment. Thekla. Wasn’t he the senior member of the cartel?’

‘Yes, he w—’

‘He represented the cartel?’

‘Yes, sir, b—’

‘And now he’s dead, you fulfil that role?’

Akunin nodded. ‘Yes, chief provost.’

‘So you are now the senior representative of the cartel?’

‘I suppose I am.’

Trice paused. ‘The cartel which... entirely failed to serve me?’

‘Well, put like that—’

Trice nodded to Revoke. Revoke drew his laspistol and shot Akunin though the back of the head. Akunin’s corpse slammed face down onto the low table, cracking its glass surface. Revoke snapped his aim up and found himself facing Lucius Worna’s steady bolt pistol.

‘No need for any of that,’ Trice said. ‘Put it away, Revoke. You too, Worna. Master Siskind?’

‘S-sir?’

‘I wish to employ fresh blood as leader of my cartel of traders. The old ones were so unreliable. I rather fancy you’d do a better job. What do you say?’

Siskind smiled. ‘I’d say put the bolter away, Worna.’

Worna obeyed.

‘Return to your ship, and await instruction,’ Trice told Siskind. ‘I’ll have clerks sent up to you with copies of the contracts. This is grown-up stuff now, Siskind. Are you up to it?’

Siskind nodded. ‘What about Unwerth?’

‘Leave him here with me.’

Siskind and Worna departed. Revoke knelt down beside Unwerth.

‘What do you get?’ Trice asked.

‘He knows little. Ravenor was careful. But he definitely brought Ravenor here. And he was paid to do it secretly.’

‘If Ravenor’s here secretly, it means he knows he’s out on a limb and can’t trust anyone, not even the local ordos. Which, of course, is very wise

of him. He'll be operating on... what's it called?

‘Special Condition, sir.’

‘Just that. A virtual rogue. And therefore infernally dangerous,’ Trice took a deep breath. ‘No more covert play, Toros. Unslip the psykers, unleash every secretist. Find Ravenor and burn him for me.’



FOUR

Zael paused with the glass of cordial halfway to his mouth, and looked upwards. The glass slid out of his fingers and smashed on the floor between his feet. He didn't seem to notice it.

'Zael?' I asked.

'Didn't you feel that?' he asked. 'I mean, you must have, it was so bright.'

I was about to reply when it hit me. A flash-flood of psy-power. Distant but immensely powerful, swirling across the hive. I was getting it real-time. Zael, foreseeing, had sensed it about to happen.

Masked in careful deceits, I reached my mind out. The vast psy-scape of Petropolis, to me a blur of dull colours and mind-forms, was punctuated by five specks of light that rose up over the stacks and spires, bright as super-novae.

Five psykers of great potency had just gone bodiless and were projecting themselves out over the city-hive.

They were hunting, searching for something. I saw pearls of fire spit out from some, dripping across rooftops, from others, beams like searchlights, tracking back and forth.

There was no clue to their identities, but I was sure that none of them was the psyker I had seen with Trice outside the diplomatic palace four nights earlier. I estimated I could handle any two of them, but all five together? They exuded a brute confidence and skill that reminded me of a devil called Kinsky.

I could not allow them to sense me. At my instruction, Frauka made himself untouchable, obscuring me, Zael and Miserimus House from view.

I found Carl in the kitchen. He was raiding the larder, piling a plate with cuts of meat, cheese and slices of swoter-bread from the boxes of provisions we'd brought in. He already had a goose's drumstick clamped in his mouth.

'What's going on?' he mumbled through it.

'Something big,' I transponded. 'I need you back at your station.'

He glanced for a moment at the pile of food on his plate. 'Leave that,' I said. 'You can come back for it.'

Carl put the plate down, but kept chewing at the drumstick as he followed me down the hall. It wasn't like Carl to eat with such gusto. He normally picked at his food, and exhibited dainty table manners. He was also forever going on about careful diet and the trimness of his figure.

By the time he'd got back in front of his cogitators, he'd stripped the meat off and tossed the bone into the wastebasket. Still munching, he wiped his greasy mouth across the back of one hand and started at the screen.

'Something's going on all right,' he agreed, typing at the keyboard and pulling up different displays of data.

'There are at least five psykers active right now,' I said.

Swallowing the last mouthful, he code-typed his way through further digitised information. Realising both his hands were oily and slick from the drumstick, he casually wiped them on the front of his soft, cream litten-silk shirt.

'Lots of Ministry activity. Magistratum too. Some kind of alert,' he said. He reached up and picked a fleck of goose-meat from between his teeth with his fingernail. 'Sir, this is far, far more than the creeping backwash scans they've been running since the attack on Trice. This is all-out open season. They're looking for something, looking hard.'

'Any ideas what, Carl?'

He shrugged. 'The Ministry traffic is coded. Encrypted, actually. I can't break it. Throne, it's the strangest code I've ever seen. Like they're not even using words.'

‘All right, back down. Have they found our graft in the Informium?’

‘Not yet, sir.’

‘Nor should they, but keep watching in case they do.’

I swung my chair round to face Zeph Mathuin.

‘Pack us up, Zeph,’ I said. ‘We might need to exit in a hurry.’

He nodded.

‘Zael can help you.’

‘If we do exit in a hurry,’ Zeph asked, ‘any idea where we might go?’

‘Contact Doctor Belknap. He might be able to help.’

Zeph paused, as if reluctant to leave the room.

‘What is it?’

‘What about the others? Kys, Nayl and Kara? With Frauka on, they’re cut loose and on their own.’

‘That’s just how it’s going to have to be,’ I said.

NOW IN HER fifth hour as a dispatcher, Kara was going numb. Her back ached thanks to the spartan stool she was obliged to perch on, and her fingers were slowly going dead from processing the cylinders, sorting them, emptying them, loading them, sending them on their way. Worse than that, her mind was weary: the constant din of the pneumatic tube despatch hall, the poor lighting, the remorseless pace of work, the *rattle-rattle-rattle* of the multigraphing pool next door. Documents arrived coded or labelled with numerals she had to struggle to read before she could assign them. She felt almost overwhelmed, moving back and forth between repetitive physical action and lines of meaningless digits.

And they really were meaningless. In the first hour or so of the shift, Kara had assumed the sheaves of data she was being given to route were incomprehensible because she was new, and didn’t understand the complex workings of Administry filing and language. But that wasn’t true, she was sure of that now. Every file coming in or going out was just nonsense.

A gatherer arrived at her station with the latest load. He didn't speak, didn't even look at her as he dropped the bundle of brown-sleeved files into her processing basket. She picked up the top one, read the department code off the cover, then sneaked a quick peek inside.

Just like before. The files and documents had a sort code for identification purposes, usually a marker that meant they had to be sent from an anagramist department to a cipherist hall or vice versa. But the actual document was gibberish. No text that could be read, no headings or paragraphs or tables of contents, no graphs or results or minutes of discussion, no punctuation or syntax. Just oddly spaced columns of letters or numerals, sometimes one or the other, sometimes a mix of both. It wasn't even as if they were written in a language she didn't know. She was processing raw data in discrete chunks.

Just looking at it made her giddy.

A clatter beside her made her jump and she closed the file quickly. A servitor had just dropped a load of empty cylinders into the cage that sat at her feet like an ammunition hopper full of heavy stub-shells. She hooked one out, packed the file inside, and fired it on its way up the appropriate tube.

Kara knew she'd be feeling better about things if Ravenor had been looking through her eyes and scrutinising things too. But he'd suddenly gone quiet almost an hour earlier, and she hadn't heard a thing since.

'BOSS?' NAYL WHISPERED into his sleeve, pretending to cough. Still nothing. That was the worst thing about having a little voice in your head: you missed it when it was gone.

He was pushing his laden cart down one of the main hallways, just another gatherer in the dense bustle of two-way traffic, following the signs to his next delivery point. No one spoke, but there was a constant noise: footsteps, squeaking wheels, rattling servitors, popping tubes, the occasional buzzer or call-chime. It felt like being buried deep in the

workings of a giant clock, the springs and screws and gears moving all around.

Except, Nayl thought, there would be some regulated order to a clock, no matter how complex its design. The systems and motions and processes of this place felt more like the inner guts of some baffling engine, designed by insanity or genius or both, labouring away towards some final, unguessable, esoteric product.

You're getting jumpy, Harlon, he told himself.

His current destination was a processing hall on level nineteen. When he got there, he had to join the end of a queue of gatherers waiting to enter. He took a rest, leaning on the handle of his cart as the line slowly edged forward.

'Long day, huh?' he said to the gatherer waiting in front of him. The man stared at him blankly then looked away.

Nayl shrugged and turned to regard the flow of workers passing by down the corridor. Other gatherers rolled up to join the queue behind him. He turned to face his cart, and idly reached down and opened the crinkled, rubber-stamped cover of the uppermost document. Inside, another stack of printout pages, covered in columns of characters and numerals that made no sense. Every document he'd managed to sneak a look at that day had been the same.

Maybe they *do* mean nothing, he thought. Maybe there is no more data in the Imperium to be processed, so the Administratum is just circulating random material through its systems in order to justify its continued existence. In a place as soulless and unending as this, he could well believe it.

A hand reached in and firmly pressed the file cover shut. Nayl looked up and found himself eye-to-eye with a frowning ordinate.

'This is not reading material, gatherer,' the ordinate said in a reedy voice. Instead of replying, Nayl took a cue from the gatherer in front of him and simply stared back blankly.

‘Deliver. Collect. Never tamper,’ the ordinate said, and moved on down the line.

Nayl’s part of the queue finally moved into the processing hall. It was the largest one he’d seen yet, the size of a mass conveyance’s main hold. It was impossible to guess how many scribes and processors manned the long rows of chattering data engines and arithmometers. The dry air was filled with the constant tympani of their fingers. There was the usual activity in the aisles: gatherers distributing or collecting, supervising ordinates, despatch runners, the occasional drifting servo-skull.

One dipped down and hovered towards him. Lights in its sockets glowed dull green, and small manipulator limbs equipped with quills dangled either side of its vox grille like the mandibles of a beetle. The drone extended a quick, bright bar of hard light and read Nayl’s slate.

‘Aisle forty-two,’ it told him in a buzzing voice that was entirely synthesised. Nayl rolled his cart towards the forty-second aisle and then proceeded down it between the lines of typing scribes at their stations until he found the first cogitator that matched his transfer codes. He put the file into the scribe’s basket. The scribe didn’t look up. Bathed in the screen glow, the man’s bloodshot, unblinking eyes reflected back the steadily scrolling digitised display.

Nayl continued down the line, distributing the folders into pending trays. Overhead, a tannoy announcement blared out, extolling the virtues of a fast, fluid work rate.

Nayl’s cart was almost empty. As soon as he’d finished, a drone or an ordinate would direct him to another aisle for collection.

He heard a sharp, sudden cry and looked up. Three aisles away, thirty metres or so from where he stood, the scribe at one particular cogitator had rocked back from his screen and was beginning to convulse. A fierce seizure gripped the man’s body, shaking him so hard several of his spinal data-plugs tore out.

Instinct told Nayl to go and help the man, but he stayed where he was. Not a single scribe in the room had even looked up, and most of the

gatherers were simply carrying on with their rounds. A few, like Nayl, had paused to look up with vague, canine curiosity.

Two ordinates shuffled down the aisle and reached the stricken scribe just before he gave a final, violent spasm and slumped head first against his screen. There was an audible crack. The man's pale forehead had butted the screen with enough force to craze the glass. The ordinates rolled him back. Even from where he was standing, Nayl could tell the man was dead. Blood dribbled from the dent on his brow.

One of the ordinates turned to the nearest gatherers, Nayl included. 'You. Assistance here.'

Nayl and two other men pushed forward obediently, and helped lift the dead scribe out of his seat. Nayl could smell sour sweat, blood and a corrupted odour that suggested the man had developed sores from too many hours in his seat. Such gross physical ailments were common amongst the Administtry workers.

A junior clerk arrived, pushing a metal trolley. Nayl expected to move the scribe's body onto it, but the gatherers put the corpse on the floor. The trolley was for the cogitator.

The ordinates uncoupled the machine's data trunks and cables, unscrewed the floor brace and then had the gatherers lift the unit onto the trolley. It was quickly wheeled away.

'Resume your tasks,' one of the ordinates told the gatherers.

Five minutes later, as Nayl was reaching the end of his aisle, he saw a small team of tech adepts arriving to connect up a new cogitator.

Twenty minutes after that, as he made his way out of the hall with a reloaded cart, Nayl saw that the cogitator was now in operation, a replacement scribe at its seat.

The body of the dead scribe still lay in the aisle, ignored, awaiting collection.

PATIENCE KYS BLINKED. She thought for a moment that she had actually been asleep, but her fingers were still striking the keys and the bright

screen display was still scrolling.

She swallowed, recovering her wits, horrified to realise that she had zoned out for a moment. The repetitive function, the noise, the screen flicker had combined to swallow her into a sort of trance. She glanced around at the operators around her, saw their glazed eyes and slack expressions, and knew that, for a moment at least, she had been just like them.

According to her chron, almost an hour had passed since she'd last looked at it.

In that time, Ravenor had gone. She could no longer feel him. Something must have happened to make him—

She suddenly realised she felt sick. Her head was throbbing and the glow of the screen was making her nauseous.

She started to type again, but just glanced between her screen and the file she was meant to be transcribing made her gorge rise again. She put both hands to her mouth and closed her eyes.

‘Scribe Yevins, why has your process rate dropped to below twenty norm?’

Kys looked up. A male ordinate, so old that the augmetic implants in his withered face were starting to rust, gazed down at her.

‘I feel... unwell,’ she murmured.

The ordinate bent down at once, not to assist her but to inspect the information displayed on her screen. As he looked away from her, Kys desperately detached the plug-wire from the analyser Carl had given her and coiled it away into her jacket pocket before he noticed it.

‘Get up,’ the ordinate instructed her. He picked up the file she was working from, noted the page she was on, and tucked it under his arm. ‘Follow me.’

She walked after him down the aisle, unsteady on legs tingling with cramp, nausea swilling through her again.

Ahead of her, she heard the ordinate speak into a hand-vox. ‘G/F1. Suspected subliminal. Please attend.’

The ordinate led her out of the department hall, along the busy corridor and through a heavy side door into what Kys thought looked like a holding cell. Bare metal walls, tiled floor, a ceiling covered with acoustic baffles. There was a simple wooden table with two chairs on one side and a stool on the other. The ordinate pointed to the stool and Kys sat down. It was hot. She took off her coat and folded it across her knees, fighting down the bilious feeling inside her.

Two men entered the room. They wore robes similar to the ordinates, but Kys had no idea what rank or department they represented. She tried to focus.

‘Junior Scribe Merit Yevins, G/F1, station eighty-six. Work rate dropped, and she complained of feeling unwell.’

The men sat down across the table from Kys. One had a data-slate, the other a fresh copy pad and a stylus. ‘This is the file she was working from,’ said the ordinate, passing it to the man with the pad and stylus. ‘I’ve marked the page.’

The man studied the page. His companion activated the data-slate. ‘Transcript of her work,’ he said, and slid it to the man with the file. He went back and forth, checking the file off against the slate copy carefully.

‘No obvious component,’ he said at last. He looked up at Kys. ‘Can you remember any particular character, character group or file sequence that you were working on when you began to feel unwell?’

‘No,’ she said softly.

‘Then did a word, or a word-part or any phonetic structure or group of characters come into your mind at that time?’

‘No,’ she said again.

‘Think about it,’ the other man said. ‘Try to recall carefully.’

‘Is there a sound you can associate with your discomfort?’ asked the first. He slid the pad and stylus across the table towards her. ‘Perhaps you can write it down? Or say it aloud?’

‘I don’t understand,’ Kys said. The nausea bubbled through her again. She felt as if she was going to pass out.

‘Let us be open with you,’ said the first man. ‘We are trying to help you. The data you are processing is in a ciphered form. Your processing is one stage of the decryption. It is possible you have stumbled upon some meaning accidentally.’

‘I... I don’t—’

‘It happens from time to time,’ the other man said. ‘At this stage in the process, scribes occasionally and inadvertently recover some small unit of true meaning. A morpheme, a phoneme, nothing more.’

‘On rarer instances,’ said the first man, ‘innocuous text, such as this’ – he gestured to the file – ‘may generate a morpheme subliminally in a scribe’s mind. This generally causes feelings of sickness. We wish to recover that subliminal. Once we have done so, we can take steps to improve your well-being.’

Kys blinked. She didn’t understand anything of what they were saying. It was just as much gibberish as the files she’d been staring at all day.

The men carried on talking. She thought about the files, the meaningless jumble of characters floating up the cogitator screen, the way they’d made her zone out.

She knew that Ravenor wouldn’t have abandoned her without a good reason, but she needed him now. With what concentration she could muster, she reached out with her mind, hoping to find the strength to call to him.

‘Are you listening, scribe?’ one of the men was saying. She touched his mind, felt his determination. He was convinced she had something in her head, something valuable that he would recover no matter how long it took.

‘Help us to help you,’ said the other man. ‘As soon as we have the subliminal, we can quickly ease your discomfort.’ She touched his mind now, saw a quick, brittle flash of what he meant by ‘ease your discomfort’. The man waiting just outside the room. The secretist in the sober suit, a gun in his pocket, waiting to be called in to put a round through the base of her skull.

Desperation seized her, but the nausea swept in more fiercely than before. Off balance, she half-rose, half-fell off the stool. She tried to get up, the ordinate trying to help her. But she was too dizzy. Then she threw up violently on the floor under the table and rolled onto her side, consciousness fading.

The last thing she heard, as if from the other end of an echo chamber, was the ordinate saying, 'What is this?'

The last thing she saw, as if through the wrong end of a telescope, was the ordinate clutching her green jacket and holding up the analyser Carl had given her.



FIVE

THREE AND A half hours after Jader Trice authorised their use, the psykers unleashed by the secretists were called off. The five of them, exhausted from the huge strain of their search efforts, fled back to the flesh forms they had left floating in dank lead holding tanks in the basement levels of the governor's palace, and rested there, moaning and whimpering.

It was late afternoon in Petropolis, the sky a dirty scumble of grey clouds and vapour. The moment the psykers ebbed away, a fierce thunderstorm broke out over the hive.

Revoke knew keeping the psykers active any longer would have been unwise. Quite apart from the fact that the psykers had come close to draining their energy reserves and he had no wish to burn out such a valuable resource, Revoke was aware of the civil issue. Though invisible and intangible to all but the most gifted or sensitive persons in Petropolis, such overt, proactive psy-activity would unsettle the general population. As it was, the data reports were busy with stories of panic attacks, freak weather effects, unprovoked domestic violence, numerous suicides and reputed sightings of the manifesting dead. Formal complaints had been made by the Astropathic Guild, the Navis Nobilite and several other august Imperial institutions that utilised psy-adepts by legal covenant.

Trice had the Ministry issue polite responses, suggesting that another grave incident like the one at the diplomatic palace had taken place, but was now under control. Months of careful political manipulation and other more devious machinations meant that virtually all agencies and organisations in Petropolis were directly or indirectly under the control of Jader Trice, including the Astrotelepathicus and the Officio Inquisitorus Planetia. But most of them didn't realise that fact, so it paid to be circumspect.

There was another reason the psykers had been put back in their boxes.

‘We’ve found him,’ said Boneheart, one of the senior lieutenants of the Secretists as Revoke entered the Counsel Room.

‘Show me,’ Revoke replied. He had brought Monicker with him and, like a heat-haze shimmer, she hovered at Revoke’s elbow as he examined the print outs Boneheart was unfolding.

‘Plenty of hits, as you can see,’ Boneheart said. He was a tall man with a craggy face pitted by old acne scars, his hair an oily, hard-combed shelf of grey. ‘Hive like this is a target-rich environment. Over nine thousand potentials, but you can rule out all the ones I’ve put a cross through. Low-level sensitives or latents who don’t even know what they’ve got. That leaves about two hundred higher grade returns, true actives. Most of them will be hucksters, faith healers, backroom clairvoyants, spiritualists, maybe even the odd sub-cult member. Some of them are interesting, and we should pass the locations to the Magistratum.’

‘But none powerful enough?’ Revoke asked.

Boneheart shook his head. ‘You said our guy’s major grade, didn’t you?’

‘From the briefs I’ve read, dangerously powerful,’ Revoke replied.

‘Well then, no,’ said Boneheart. ‘If we’re looking for a gamma or a beta, an alpha even, there are only a few hits that match.’ He tapped his finger on the graph at a particularly large wobble in the signal. ‘Like that. Except that’s the Astropath Guild. And that, that’s the guild’s sub-station at Tenthe Arch. In fact, most of the big returns here can be identified as legit psy uses. Except these four.’

He pointed. ‘This one, up in Stairtown. Could be our man, but intelligence suggests it’s a known unsanctioned psyker called Efful Trevis. Same story here in Central E. Another black-market mind-pirate known to us. And here. In J. Same again. I’ve sent teams out to secret all three, but I’m pretty sure all we’ll be doing is closing down unsanctioned activities that the ordos should have picked up long since.’

‘Which behind leaves one,’ Monicker whispered.

Boneheart nodded. 'That's right. This one. It fits damn well. High grade activity, delta at the very least. The site is meant to be unoccupied, so that matches too. A hideaway, someone acting in seclusion.'

'Show me the map,' Revoke said. Another of the secretists passed him a hand slate. The chief provost was quite particular. We are to move in immediately and end this.'

Revoke looked up at the secretists around him. The low-lit room was quiet except for the chatter of codifiers and data-engines. 'Ravenor is an Imperial inquisitor. We must not underestimate his abilities, nor the abilities of the men and women who accompany him. This will be a full force operation, maximum prejudice. I'll be leading it. I want you, Boneheart and Monicker, Tolemi, Rove and Molay as team leaders. Combat ordnance. Where's Drax?'

Secretist Molay looked awkwardly at Boneheart.

'I thought you'd been told, Toros,' Boneheart said. 'Drax is dead.'

'Since when?' Revoke asked, his voice as heavy and cold as permafrost.

'This morning,' Molay replied. 'He was part of the operation to secret the members of Special Crimes. Someone shot him at a residence in Formal E.'

'Who was he secreting?'

Molay referred to his data-slate. 'Uh, a junior marshal called Maud Plyton. She worked with Rickens. Lived with her uncle at the address. Two other bodies were recovered from the scene, one male, one female, so that probably accounts for the girl and her uncle. Both were reported as shredded by the sheen birds. Maybe this junior marshal popped Drax before the birds got her.'

Revoke pursed his lips. 'What is the status of the Unkindness now?'

'They're loose, naturally,' Boneheart said. 'But we've got Drax's pupil Foelon working to bring them under control. He's a good boy. I estimate we'll have the Unkindness back in play before the morning.'

'Very well,' said Revoke. 'I'll review this matter again later. For now, we have our priority. And we'll just have to do it without bird cover. Harness

up. I want us airborne in twenty minutes.'

THUNDER PEELED ACROSS the murky city. In Formal E, rain lashed down out of the premature night, rippling the windows of Miserimus House.

Frauka was cooking. Zeph was still prowling the place, a gun in his hand. Carl had gone upstairs to shower. I sat, watching over Carl's machines as they mumbled and whirred, watching data-fields pulse and flicker on the screens. Whatever had been stirred up was now dying down, but that didn't mean we could relax. Only the insane or the recklessly powerful would unleash five psykers to scour an Imperial hive. No, let me correct myself. Only the insane, the recklessly powerful or the Holy Inquisition would unleash five psykers so.

We had not been found, and Wystan's limiter was still off, blotting me out from prying minds. But it was just a matter of time. My confidence was faltering. I had come back to this world, dragging my loyal friends along, to uncover some great conspiracy. I had even boasted that I thought it might go right to the top.

Now, the more I pushed, the higher it got. Arrogantly, I had come back to this world under the badge of Special Condition, cutting myself off so heroically from support or back-up, safe in the knowledge that I was an Imperial inquisitor and, armed with that authority, I could explode this heresy.

Hubris. That's meant to be noble, isn't it? As a human quality, it rates next to stupidity in my opinion. We were going against foes of demonstrably formidable power, the planetary authorities themselves. Just us, the eight of us if you included Zael. We would all pay for my arrogance. Every single one of my friends would—

'What are you thinking about?'

Zael was with me, curled up in a drum chair.

'Guess.'

He sat up. 'You were thinking that we're really fricked up,' he said.

‘Where did you learn language like that, Zael Efferneti?’ I asked. ‘Have you been hanging out with Nayl too much?’

He smiled. ‘Streets of Petropolis, born and bred,’ he said. ‘I know all kinds of swears.’

‘I’m sure you do.’

‘Was I right?’ he asked.

I hesitated for a moment. ‘We could be in a difficult situation, Zael. I may have put you in a difficult situation. If I have, I’m sorry.’

‘Can’t you find the bad guys then?’

I turned my chair to face him. ‘Some of them. What really matters is what they’re trying to do. We don’t know that yet. Once we do, maybe we’ll—’

‘What?’ he asked.

Die horribly, I thought. ‘Do something about it,’ I transponded.

‘Sacristy,’ he said suddenly, getting to his feet and reaching for a glass of water from Carl’s desk.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘Sacristy. I don’t know what the word means, but I had a dream where it was very important. Dreams are important, right? You told me that.’

‘For someone like you,’ I said and spurred my chair towards him. ‘Say it again. “Sacristy”?’

He nodded. ‘Sacristy. I had this dream, and when I woke up I thought I’d better remember that, so I did. But only just then.’

‘Tell me about it.’

He blushed.

‘Go on.’

‘All right. I... I was dreaming I was in this lovely golden place. Like a landscape. Green hills, woods, a glade, all these beautiful people walking around with haloes of light around them. There were some buildings too. I think they were golden. That’s probably where the golden thing comes from.’

‘Uh huh... move on.’

‘So one of the people is Kara. And she looks really good,’ He paused and blushed a darker shade. ‘She had this white gown on, it was really tight. Halter neck. And she said, she made me promise...’

‘What?’

‘If... if I remembered to tell you the word “sacristy”, she’d take her dress off and—’

I swung away. ‘That’s great, Zael. Keep up the good work.’

‘But I haven’t told you the end of the dream yet!’ he protested.

‘I can imagine.’

‘But—’

Carl wandered in. He’d showered and changed. He was wearing black velvet trousers with high boots and a tight black singlet. It showed the taut flesh of his torso and arms, but it also displayed the grim, puckered suture scars around his right upper arm where the limb had been reattached. I was surprised. Carl had been so fastidious about hiding his awful wound so far. He had been ashamed of it, and thought it spoiled his perfect looks.

No longer, apparently.

He smiled at me. ‘What are you two talking about?’

‘You don’t want to know,’ I said.

‘Oh, I do!’ he grinned, sitting down at his workstation.

‘Kara undressing,’ I said, trusting that would put him off.

‘I had a dream!’ Zael protested.

‘I’m sure you did, little man,’ Carl beamed. ‘You two boys and your smut when you get alone together.’

Now I felt embarrassed.

Carl’s fingers danced across the keyboard, pulling up the latest data-skeins. Carl had always worn jewellery – it was part of his measured elegance – but now I saw that every finger on his right hand was laced with rings. Four or five to each digit. The left hand was bare.

‘Nice rings,’ I suggested.

‘Thanks,’ he replied, flexing his right hand towards me to show off nearly thirty rings, including those around his thumb. ‘If you’ve got them, flaunt them, I say.’

‘Status?’ I asked him.

Carl looked at his screen. ‘Lots of agitation still. Plenty of Ministry comm traffic, plenty of Magistratum flare. Gimme a sec to punch up some data for you.’

The vox chimed. It was Zeph. ‘Contact coming in. Hnh. Stand down, it’s Nayl.’

Harlon had ridden the commute rail back into E from the Ministry towers. He was tired and hacked off and bedraggled from the storm.

‘Don’t think I can handle another day like that, Gideon,’ he told me as he settled down next to me, swigging a big amasec Carl had poured for him. ‘I mean, I thought our lives were supposed to be hard. In the Ministry towers, like a drone, it’s a mind killer. Just relentless crap. You know, I actually saw a scribe die at his station. And you know what they rushed to the medics? His cogitator.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

Nayl shrugged, sipping his drink. Rain clattered against the windows like pebbles. He looked more exhausted than I’d ever seen him and that was saying something.

‘It’s all about the data, I think. The data,’ he shrugged again. ‘I don’t know what they’re processing in there, but it’s not straight information. It’s like code, a jumble, a cipher. It seems all wrong to me. Then again, I don’t know what it’s like in any Administratum centre.’

‘You sampled the sort of stuff you’re talking about?’ I asked.

Nayl nodded. ‘Yeah, I used my picter when I could. You make sense of it.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Carl. ‘I still haven’t made anything intelligible out of the stuff from Kys’s feed.’

‘Speaking of, where is Patience?’ Carl asked. Nayl frowned. Kara had told me she intended to visit Belknap before she came back so he could

check her dressings, so I wasn't expecting her for another couple of hours at least. But Patience, like Nayl, was supposed to come straight back to Miserimus after her shift.

She should have arrived by now.

'Her analyser's no longer transmitting,' Carl reported. 'Hasn't been for quite a while now. I'd just assumed she'd turned it off.'

'Wystan?' I said.

Frauka paused. 'You sure? It could still be a risk.'

'Do it, please.'

He activated his limiter.

Immediately my mind rose free. I reached out carefully, masking myself, but the psykers had gone, leaving an aggravated weather pattern behind them.

+Patience?+

I couldn't see her, couldn't even sense her unique bio-signature.

+Patience?+

There was no reply.

THE ARMoured FLIERS dipped down towards the target location, mobbing through the evening light and the thunderstorm.

Clad in black body-armour, his hellgun cinched across his belly, Toros Revoke climbed to his feet in the red-lit hold of the lead flier. He looked back at the secretists harnessed to the bare metal walls.

'Make ready to deploy,' he called above the purr of the jet wash.

AS IF THICKENED and darkened by the storm, night had closed in across the bay side of the hive. Squalling inshore winds crashed the high tide against the breakwaters, pounding the stone piers of the outer flood defences.

The occulting lighthouse, a black tower against a black sky, pulsed out its regular flashes, as if defiantly refusing to match the haphazard rhythms of the lightning.

Inside, the cold, gloomy chambers and galleries had been lit by thousands of tapers and old, stained glow-globes. The storm winds hissed in under ill-fitting doors and rotting shutters, gusting like unquiet spirits along the dark halls, guttering the taper flames. Five of the fraters, armed with tindersticks, were occupied in a patrol of the lighthouse, relighting all the tapers and candles the intruding wind extinguished.

Most of the other Fraternity members were at devotion in the stockbrick basement, or working in huddled groups in various parts of the structure to record the latest refinements to the prospect and its focus and determiners as revealed by the meniscus. The psyker who Orfeo Culzean had ordered them to procure, an evil-tempered renegade astrotelepath called Eumone Vilner, had arrived that afternoon, and he was hard at work relaying the whispered messages of the fraters on Nova Durma.

In his private chamber, bathed in the light of the five oil lamps, the magus-clancular was taking his supper. Gawdel, a junior frater with a face mercilessly disfigured by disease, was feeding Lezzard liquidised nutrition supplements with a long-handled spoon. Lezzard's exo-shell lacked the subtle motor control to feed himself, and his crumbling, back-peg teeth were long past dealing with solids. After every couple of spoonfuls, Gawdel sponged the magus-clancular's chin with a cloth.

'A little more wine,' Lezzard wheezed and Gawdel obediently held the cup up to his mouth.

There was an urgent knock on the chamber door.

'Come,' Lezzard called.

Arthous entered, along with Frater Bonidar. They both appeared anxious. Each of them carried armfuls of paper scraps, seer papers, so many that some slipped from their grasp and fluttered to the floor.

'Magus...' Arthous began.

'What's the matter?' Lezzard asked, elevating his exo-skeleton so he was standing.

'A sudden... I don't know what to call it...' Arthous stammered. 'A sudden flurry in activity from the meniscus. We're being inundated with

new determiners.'

'They're coming so fast they're contradicting themselves,' said Bonidar.

Lezzard remained composed. 'My brothers, my dear brothers, calm yourselves. When you have served the silver mirrors as long as I have, you will know that from time to time such urgency breaks out. A sea-change has occurred somewhere, perhaps a quiet, subtle thing. Someone has experienced a change of heart or inadvertently reckoned upon a new course of action. Some subtle thing. Its effects however, may be far-reaching for our prospect. So the future is reshuffling its deck, rearranging itself to compensate, a knock-on effect. That is what causes these occasional flurries of contradiction. By the morning, it will have calmed, just as this storm will pass and calm, and a new, true picture will be readable. Why, I remember a time on Gloricient, years ago when—'

'I think,' Arthous butted in. 'I think it's more than that. See for yourself...'

He held out a clutch of the papers in trembling fingers. Lezzard squinted to read them because the thin scraps were backlit by one of the lamps.

'Ravenor. Ravenor. Ravenor,' said Arthous. 'And again here. And here. And see? Trice, again and again. Twenty, thirty times.'

The magus-clancular raised a metal-caged hand. 'They are known determiners, both of them major focal points. This is to be expected.'

'But new names are appearing too,' Bonidar said. 'Here, this name: Revoke. We've not seen it before now, but it has turned up eight times. And this one, Boneheart. And this one, Molay. And others besides.'

Lezzard frowned. 'Show me,' he said.

The two fraters dropped their paper scraps onto the floor, knelt down and began scrabbling through them, holding up certain readings to show to the magus-clancular.

'Here,' said Arthous. 'Another new name. Zael Efferneti. It occurs, by my count... six times. And this. Kara Swole. Two instances.'

'Three,' corrected Bonidar. 'Also this name: Siskind. And this one. Lilean Chase: And this, Zygmunt Molotch. His name is clouded, but it features on

thirteen occasions.'

'All will become clear once the future settles—' Lezzard began, but the tone of his voice betrayed his concern.

Arthous rose from the floor and held out a scrap of paper in each hand. 'Read these, then, magus, and understand our fear.'

Lezzard bent forward to look at the scribbled writing on the two scraps. One read, *Orfeo Culzean*. The other said simply, *Stefoy*.

There was a long silence in which only the wind and the rain and thunder spoke.

'Bring Frater Stefoy to me,' Lezzard said quietly.

The two fraters nodded and turned towards the door.

The front entrance of the lighthouse detonated.

Throughout the building, the brothers of the Divine Fraternity barely had time to react before a second blast shook the place, then a third. The tang of smoke filled the lower chambers, and the brothers could hear cries and the blurt of gunfire. They ran to grab weapons of their own.

The killers broke into the lighthouse from all sides, kicking in doors, smashing through window shutters. The storm blew in along with them, and to the bewildered fraters it seemed as if the wind and rain had taken human form to invade their stronghold.

The first group of fraters to have found firearms clattered down the main staircase into the entrance hall and met the wrath of the invaders head on. Unarmoured, and firing only poor quality las-pieces and autoguns, the fraters were cut down without quarter. The intruding killers, grim figures in their black combat plating stalked forward out of the smoke billowing from the ruptured threshold, placing shot-bursts with their hellguns. Fraters were blown off their feet as they tried to return fire, or were hit in the back as they broke and fled. The hallway and stairs were quickly littered with tangled bodies.

'Up,' Revoke signalled to Boneheart. His mind already had a firm lock on the psy-trace somewhere in the basement area.

Boneheart led his squad up the staircase, firing from their shoulders at the landing above as they went. Clipped by the whining energy bolts, sections of the old wooden banister exploded and shattered. The body of a frater tumbled down, hit the stairs and slithered to a halt.

As Boneheart's secretists reached the landing a group of fraters led by Bonidar pinned them briefly, establishing a ragged crossfire from the doorways of the first floor rooms. One of the secretists staggered back, wounded.

Boneheart got in behind the stairway wall and threw a grenade. The bang of light and pressure threw debris out across the landing and forced Bonidar and his men back, dazed and shaken. The secretists rushed them. They swung into each doorway, firing their hellguns on rapid. Fraters jerked and fell, blown backwards, some dismembered by the searing shots. Boneheart himself stormed the largest chamber. Firing from the shoulder, he killed the three fraters in the doorway, then swung round to slaughter two more who were trying to hide behind a table.

Bonidar was in the far corner. He ran at the looming secretist, firing his lasrifle. Two bolts scorched off Boneheart's shoulder guard. With an amused grunt, he altered his aim and fired a single shot. It exploded Bonidar's sternum, communicating such force to the frater's body that it flew backwards across the room, smacked into the wall and dropped on its front.

A bitter hub of fighting now broke out on the back stairs as Molay's team began to push in through the lighthouse's undercroft. Frater Arthous and about twenty of the brothers, armed with autoguns and las-locks, were defending the stairhead, and they had the advantage of cover. The stairwell air became a thick fume of rising smoke through which jittering bolts criss-crossed and glittered.

Molay dropped back and signalled to the handlers in his team. The men released their cannon-hounds.

The quadruped weapon-servitors pounded forward, heavy and hunched as mastiffs. They came up out of the smoke and began to thump up the stairs,

their eyes projecting the pink lances of their recognition beams. The fraters immediately began to concentrate their fire on them, but hard round and las-shot alike bounced off the servitors' chrome armour. For a moment, both cannon-hounds were lit up with white sparks as ordnance spattered off them. Then they returned fire.

Each weapon-servitor was armed with a pair of gun-pods mounted either side of its hulking shoulders. The combined firepower of the four lasrifles shredded the stairhead and most of the defending fraters along with it. The cannon-hounds padded forward through the burning devastation they had wrought, playing their recog beams across the charred bodies, looking for anyone still alive. Any they found was despatched with a single close-range las-pulse.

Frater Arthous had lost most of a leg in the fusillade. He tried to drag himself clear, grunting in pain and fear as the hounds closed in behind. Arthous glanced over his shoulder just as the first pink beam found him. Then the las-pulse cracked and the frater's head vaporised.

On the floor above, Frater Gawdel and half a dozen other brothers were trying to carry the magus-clancular to a room where they could best defend him. A few other fraters ran ahead, frantically searching for sanctuary. Behind them, they could all hear the rattle of exchanged weapons-fire as armed brethren held a rearguard at the end of the passageway.

Monicker had taken the semblance of the first frater she'd seen on entering the lighthouse, and in that guise she now joined Gawdel and his fellows, apparently to help them with their efforts to carry the magus-clancular. As soon as she was in amongst them, she drew her serrated blade.

One of the fraters suddenly fell back against the wall, blood jetting from between the fingers he had clamped to his throat. Another to Lezzard's left fell with a shriek.

'What in the name of—' Gawdel cried.

Two more fraters fell dead, and now Gawdel and Lezzard could see the bloodied blade in the hands of the brother who had most recently come to help them.

‘Kaska?’ Lezzard breathed, aghast. ‘What is this you do?’

Frater Kaska smiled, then trembled and wasn’t Kaska any more. There was just a vague blur in the smoky dark, a glimmer of silver like the ocean at night. The blade flashed out and sliced so deeply through Gawdel’s neck the serrated edge grated against his spine.

‘P-please...’ Magus-clancular Lezzard whispered.

Slowly, Monicker lifted Lezzard’s eye-patch and raised the blade towards his one good eye.

+LEAD ME TO this back way.+

Frater Stefoy gasped as the words dug at his brain. He stumbled back a few steps from Eumone Vilner. The psyker continued to glare at him.

‘I’m not sure I know of any—’

+I can see it right there in your head, you turd. There is a tunnel exit out of the basement levels to the west, running inside the flood defences. Show me. I have no intention of staying here for *that* to arrive.+

Vilner furnished the word *that* with a gesture at the roof and the sustained sounds of violence echoing down into the basement chambers. Almost all the fraters had left the basement to take up arms, but Stefoy and three others had been ordered to see to the welfare of the odious psyker. The dank chamber around them was empty but for the deserted tables laid out with scrying devices, the small silver mirrors and the bowls of paper scraps.

+Show me!+ Vilner emphasised, hard enough to make Stefoy and the other three wince.

Stefoy turned and hurried over into the far corner of the basement area and started to move aside old packing crates. He’d only been told about the tunnel, he didn’t know if it was even navigable. But he found himself agreeing with Vilner: it sounded a safer bet than venturing upstairs. Behind

the crates, Stefoy found a boarded-up section of wall. He scrabbled at the old planks so hard he drew blood from his fingertips.

+Hurry up!+ The command came with a pain-goad this time, and Stefoy cried out. He kicked at the old planks until they began to come away and then pulled a few off until there was enough room to slide through into the wet darkness beyond.

‘Come on, sir!’ he shouted back. Stefoy could hear the booming of the sea, and the darkness smelled of salt.

Vilner and the other fraters started forward. The psyker shoved the brothers aside with his mind so he would be first to reach the gap in the planking.

Suddenly he turned. ‘Holy Throne!’ he hissed.

Revoke was striding across the basement chamber towards them. His hellgun came up and he started to fire. One of the fraters pitched over, his face blown off. Vilner grabbed the other two brothers with his potent telekinesis and dragged them together so they formed a shield of flesh and bone between himself and the oncoming secretist.

Revoke fired again and the psy-bound fraters convulsed as the energy rounds ripped into them. Vilner held their exploded carcasses in the air for a second with his mind, then threw them aside, spearing his telekinesis forward to wrench the weapon out of Revoke’s grip. It bounced off the ceiling and clattered into a corner.

Revoke and Vilner faced each other, rigid as statues. Their minds engaged. The basement around them shook with the psychic backwash. Glow-globes burst. Tables vibrated and shook precious scrying mirrors onto the floor. Bowls overturned and scattered seer papers into the air.

Shaking with effort, Revoke took one slow step forward. Veins bulged like hawsers in Vilner’s neck. His hands slowly came up at his sides, fists balled. Revoke took another step forward. Some of the paper scraps spontaneously ignited, swirling in the air like fireflies.

Table legs warped and buckled. A small stool tipped over and began to spin like a child’s top. Hundreds of the old stockbricks in the wall cracked

and shattered, spilling out mortar and dust.

Revoke took a third, leaden step.

Vilner's mouth moved weakly. He made a wet, rattling sound in his throat. Revoke closed his eyes and furrowed his brow with one final effort.

Eumone Vilner turned inside out.

It happened very quickly, like a sudden conjuring trick. There was a brief but intense noise of flesh tearing and bones fracturing, then the psyker burst in a huge shower of blood and gobbets of meat.

Revoke breathed out and wiped a spatter of gore from his cheek.

STEOFY COULD FINALLY see a frail light ahead. The tunnel was pitch-black, and he had already fallen twice and torn his hands and knees against the rough, salt-wet floor. The booming of the sea was louder now. He realised he could see a flight of stone steps leading up to a small door of metal bars. Backscattered lightning was peeping in through the bars.

Stefoy struggled up the slippery steps and fought to draw the rusty bolt on the bar-door. Outside, he could see the breakwater wall, the sea crashing over it in huge clouds of spume so white they seemed luminous in the night air. Rain was in his face, and wind. The bolt finally drew and he swung the door out, stumbling through onto the gleaming black stone of the sea wall. The force of the wind nearly picked him off into the roiling sea, but he staggered on, shielding his face from the breakwater sprays that exploded rhythmically over the lip of the wall.

Thunder boomed overhead. Stefoy turned to look at the lighthouse, three hundred metres back along the breakwater. Through the rain and the spray, he saw the dark armoured fliers hovering on stall-jets around it, the probing beams of their stablights, the amber glow of the fires now raging in the lower levels of the tower.

Up ahead of him, a metal ladder ran down the landward side of the sea wall. Stefoy clambered down it, and started to run through the midnight landscape of derelict drydocks and rope-maker barns back towards the city.

REVOKE TURNED AWAY from the smatters of Vilner spread across the basement chamber and started to search the room with his mind. It lighted on something almost at once. He walked over to a heavy, padlocked coffer standing in a side alcove. A single un-word blew the lock off. Revoke lifted the coffer's lid and looked inside.

‘Well, well,’ he murmured. There was a sound on the stairs, crunching boots. Without looking round, Revoke knew it was Boneheart.

‘Are we secure?’ Revoke asked.

Boneheart nodded.

‘This wasn’t Ravenor,’ Revoke said. ‘It was a practising cult, with a hired psyker. Not what we hoped, but interesting nevertheless.’

‘So where is Ravenor?’ Boneheart asked.

‘Hidden,’ Revoke replied. ‘Hidden better than we can see. We have underestimated his talents. Call the teams. Tell them I want at least one of these cultist bastards kept alive for questioning.’

Boneheart did as he was ordered. Then he looked back at Revoke. ‘So what now? The chief provost won’t be happy that w—’

‘We’ll get Ravenor for him,’ Revoke said. ‘I believe I may have found a new way to do it. Help me with this.’

Revoke closed the lid of the coffer, and Boneheart took hold of the other end. Together, the two men carried it away across the basement, towards the steps.

Behind them, ignored, the seer papers tumbled in the breeze, some of them burning.

Thonius, they read, every single one of them. *Thonius*, *Thonius*, *Thonius*...



SIX

HE TAPED THE gauze in place, then peeled off his surgical gloves as Kara pulled her top back down.

‘It’s looking much better,’ Belknap said. ‘The wound’s clean.’

‘Thanks,’ Kara said and got to her feet. Outside in the shabby waiting room of Belknap’s makeshift surgery, a man was singing loudly in a drunken slur and other voices were yelling at him to shut up.

‘Lively tonight,’ Kara said.

‘Pretty much the same as usual,’ Belknap said. ‘So, how are things?’

Kara shrugged. ‘Difficult. Tense. The direction of our investigation has changed and the work’s tough. Not dangerous *per se*, but boring in the worst way. And a member of our team is overdue. Missing.’

‘That’s not good,’ Belknap said. ‘But I actually meant you.’

‘Oh.’

‘You didn’t have to come all the way down to Formal I just to get that dressing changed. I presumed it was a cover story so we could talk about the... private matter.’

Kara smiled. ‘Oh, that. Yes, I suppose so,’ She sat back down on the old barber’s chair. ‘The medication you gave me, I don’t know if it’s working or not. I mean I don’t feel particularly better and in some ways I feel worse. I get tired very easily, and concentration is a problem. And when I try to sleep, no matter how tired I feel, I stay awake for hours. Could that be a side-effect of the drugs?’

‘Possibly,’ Belknap replied. ‘It is going to be difficult to distinguish as we go along what are effects of your condition and what are effects of the treatment. Let’s stick with it for a few days, then switch to another inhibitor if the fatigue is still an issue.’

‘I need to be sharp,’ Kara said.

‘Of course.’

‘Now more than ever. I was wondering if there was anything in there...’ she nodded her head towards his modest pharmacy stock. ‘Anything in there that might be a little stronger-acting.’

‘Kara, if you want to stay sharp, then morphiates and pain-masks are not what you need. You’d be better off managing any pain or discomfort. Anyway, the strongest thing I can prescribe doesn’t come out of the cabinet.’

‘Go on,’ she said, brushing red hair off her face.

Belknap smiled a little self-consciously. ‘Corny, I know, but... strong, positive thinking. Your state of mind can have the most extraordinary effect.’

‘Oh, of course I want to stay positive...’

‘I’m talking about more than that. Belief,’ He reached into his vest and pulled out the silver aquila that he wore alongside his old dog-tags. ‘In wartime, call it courage. In peacetime, call it faith. In the Guard, I saw men do amazing things... fight off infection, heal wounds... just because they believed. And I saw men die just because they didn’t.’

‘Well, I believe,’ Kara said. ‘I mean, I’m no zealot. I can’t actually remember when I last went to temple. But I believe in the God-Emperor. After all, I’ve pretty much devoted my life to His service.’

‘Oh, I know,’ Belknap replied. ‘And that’s good, but it is easy to believe in Him, isn’t it? We know He’s real, after all. The faith I’m talking about, the real faith, comes from the belief that He’s watching *us* and has the power to transform our lives.’

Kara pursed her lips. ‘Well, I think I’ve always believed that,’ she said. ‘But I’ve also always believed in expressing devotion to the Golden Throne through deed and duty. I’ve never been big on high mass and night song and all that standing up and sitting down.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Belknap. ‘But the ritual can be good too. It focuses the mind on the act of belief. Devotion through deed is fair enough, but

most of the time all you're thinking about is the deed itself, not the devotion. Making time to go to the temple reminds you it's just about the divine. About you and your relationship to the power above us all. Sometimes worship should be a choice, not a by-product.'

'I'll take that under consideration,' Kara smiled.

Belknap got to his feet, clearing away the torn paper packet of the dressing. 'That's fine. You asked my advice. In my experience, faith is the strongest medicine of all. Especially in cases, such as yours, where the illness is so...'

'Terminal?' she suggested bluntly.

He nodded. 'In such cases, there can be a measurable effect. Just through faith and positive thinking, patients have reduced painful symptoms, enhanced their quality of life, extended their expectancy, even, in rare cases, found remission. I mean to say they have survived cancers that absolutely should have killed them. Because they believed the God-Emperor was watching, and He was.'

'Right,' said Kara, also rising to her feet. 'I'll stop off at a temple on my way back now, light a taper, say the *vobis*. How's that?'

'It's a start. Two streets from here is St Aldocis Understack. Small place, poor, but honest. You could do worse.'

Kara shook her head. 'Oh no,' she said. 'If I'm going to go to a temple, I want the full awe and wonder experience. I want heavyweight Ecclesiarchy The whole deal.'

'Well, Petropolis has more than its share of fine cathedrals and high temples,' said Belknap. The Basilica Hierophantus in Formal B, St Benedict's, St Malkus in the Square – tallest spire in the subsector, Falthaker Abbey – that's in C, very pretty. And of course the grand templum and the Ecclesiarchus in Formal A.'

'They sound about right,' Kara said. 'Thanks. I'll come back and see you in a day or two,' She started to leave.

'Kara?' She turned back and was suddenly face to face with Belknap. He reached up and unclasped the silver aquila's chain from around his neck.

‘Something to help you on your way.’

‘That’s yours,’ she protested.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Been with me since I was a boy. But I think it’ll be content enough to come along with you.’

She put up her hands to lift her hair away from the nape of her neck so he could hook the chain in place. For a second, she felt the warmth of his hands, and smelled the faint musk of his cologne. Then he stepped back.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

OUTSIDE, IN THE sub-stack sink, Kara hurried along the underwalk towards the transit station. The night was bustling with people, and rainwater from the ferocious storm high above was drooling down through the sink levels.

Kara pulled out her hand-vox. ‘It’s me. I’m on my way back. Just a quick stop to make. I’ll be an hour and a half. Any sign of Patience yet?’

‘NO,’ I RESPONDED. ‘I’ll keep you informed.’ I closed the link and turned my chair back to the others. Patience was now almost two hours overdue. Carl was showing nothing useful on his data-engines, and there was no response from Patience’s hand-vox. Every five minutes, I had Frauka activate his limiter so I could look for her, but it was no good. She was either shielded somewhere, or—

I didn’t want to think about the alternative.

Nayl was getting impatient. ‘I’m going back,’ he said, getting to his feet.

‘Back where?’ Carl asked.

‘The Ministry tower,’ Nayl replied.

‘We don’t know she’s there,’ Carl said.

Checking his weapon and his vox-link, Nayl glared at him. ‘We don’t know much about anything helpful at *all*, do we, Thonius? Which is frigging ironic given *the stuff you know*.’

‘Lose the snide tone, you knuck-head oaf,’ Carl snapped. ‘I’m worried about her too.’

‘That’s enough, both of you,’ I said.

Nayl shrugged. 'All right. But the one thing we do know is the Ministry tower's the last place she was seen.'

'You're tired,' Mathuin said. 'I'm fresh. I'll go.'

Nayl shook his head. 'I've spent the day there, Zeph. Know my way around at least a little. Better if it's me.'

'I find myself agreeing with Carl,' I put in. 'We don't know where Kys is, so I don't know how you expect to find her in a place that size.'

'I don't. You're going to find her,' Nayl said. 'Don't know how, but you'll think of a way. And when you do find her, I'll be right there, ready and waiting to get her out.'

With that, he left. We heard the main door slam shut.

'Wystan,' I said. 'Let's try it again.'

Frauka activated his limiter.

+Patience?+

No reply.

+Patience, where are you?+

KYS OPENED HER eyes. It was cold. She was lying on the ground, on her side. In front of her, just a metre away, the foot of a whitewashed brick wall. The floor she was sprawled on was tiled with glossy white squares.

For a moment, she thought she was naked, until she realised she was wearing a thin gown of disposable paper, the type they sometimes gave patients in infirmaries. Her feet and legs were bare. Her hands were cuffed in front of her with heavy metal binders. She realised that the main reason she'd felt naked was because not a single erg of psy-power existed in her head. Her talent was gone, as surely and completely as when Frauka did his blunting trick.

She rolled over so she was facing into the room. A secure cell, definitely. Caged lights in the ceiling, a heavy gauge hatch in the opposite wall. A plain wooden chair on the floor next to her. Across the room, a man sat on an identical chair, facing her, his back to the door. He wore a simple, sober

suit of dark grey with a black dress shirt. His pale skin was freckled and he had slightly thinning red hair.

As she rolled over, he reached a hand to his ear and activated what must have been a micro-bead comm-link.

‘She’s awake.’

Then he remained sitting there, staring at her.

After a couple of minutes, the hatch whirred open and an identically dressed man entered. He was a little taller, a little heavier than the first, paunchy around the waist, with cropped dark hair and the flat nose of a pugilist. He carried a paper sack in one hand, and a small, stubby actuator wand in the other, which he waved to close the hatch behind him. The freckled man got up, took the wand from his colleague, and went to stand by the door.

The dark-haired man sat down facing Kys, and held out one hand to indicate the empty chair beside her. Kys got up, unsteady at first, and sat on the chair.

The man looked at her. ‘Things sometimes aren’t what they seem,’ he began. ‘At face value, they’re one thing, but peer under the surface and you find all kinds of secrets. Luckily, secrets are what I and my friend here deal in. Secrets. We’re experts, you might say.’

Kys made no reply.

‘So you,’ the man went on. ‘At face value, you’re Junior Scribe Merit Yevins. You started work today in Administry Tower Three, department G/F1, station eighty-six.’ He reached into the sack and produced Kys’s permit. ‘Your documents check out. They’re not fakes or copies. We even ran them through the Informium. Merit Yevins. That’s you. So, what we appear to have is a junior scribe, who became unwell after accidental exposure to a subliminal whilst working at her station.’

Kys just stared back at him.

‘But there’s more to it, isn’t there?’ the man said. He put the permit back in the sack and lifted out the analyser. ‘You were found to be concealing

this. Data-analyser, expensive model. That's odd, isn't it? Why would a junior scribe be transmitting data for analysis?'

The man dropped the analyser into the sack, rummaged around for a moment and then took out Kys's hand-vox. 'Then there's this. Hand-vox. Common enough. So what? Well, this is odd too. It's new. It was purchased locally not more than a week ago. And it's been altered. Altered by someone who really knows his way around tech-priest stuff. No stored calling codes, which is funny, because everybody stores calling-codes. And it doesn't log. It's been fixed not to log. Outgoing or incoming, no codes get recorded. So there's no way of telling who Merit Yevins calls or who's been calling Merit Yevins.'

He looked at Kys for a moment, and when she made no reply, he continued. 'So we're really scratching our heads at this point, and then we find these.' He put the vox back in the sack and took out something else. 'They were laced into the hem of your jacket. Thin blades, without handles, seriously sharp. That's a whole new level of odd. Then one of my colleagues here – and I might point out at this stage that the people I work with have all kinds of specialist knowledge – anyway, he says these are kineblades. Designed for use by adepts with telekinetic powers. So we scanned you. You were unconscious through all of this, by the way. And lo and behold, the scan reads you as a telekine. What's more, the sort of telekine it doesn't pay to mess with. So I'm thinking it's very likely that you're not Merit Yevins at all. Because Merit Yevins isn't a trained combat telekine with access to these sorts of toys. Nor is she the sort of person with the expertise to persuade the Informium itself to lie about her identity,' He smiled. 'We still don't know how you pulled that one.'

'Incidentally,' he said, putting the kineblades away and handing the sack to the freckled man, 'we inhibited you. You must be able to feel that. Standard limiters, even lockable ones, can be removed or tampered with. So we injected a fluid suspension of micro-blockers directly into your bloodstream. You won't be able to use your psychic powers again for at least another twelve hours.'

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. ‘Do you have a name?’

‘Do you?’ Kys asked.

The man sat back and grinned. ‘All right, let’s play. I imagined we would. My name is Suldon. My pal here, his name is Brade. We are agents of the Ministry of Sub-sector Trade, though our agency is clandestine. We’re called secretists. You’re being detained in the secure wing of our headquarters. I tell you all this simply to demonstrate the hopelessness of your situation. No one knows where you are. No one is coming for you. Our powers of detention are entirely beyond Administratum law, as are our methods of interrogation. You will never see the outside world again. You are not likely to live more than a day or two. Everything you are, everything you were hoping to achieve, it’s all over and done with. Finished. The only thing you have left is the power to determine the quality of what remains of your life. Give us the information we need, and that quality will be relatively high. We’ll take care of your last few hours in a way that you will thank us for at the end. Obstruct us, and when that end comes, I promise you you’ll remember this moment, and loathe yourself for making the wrong choice.’

‘Do they train you in these techniques,’ Kys asked softly, ‘or were you born a silver-tongued bastard?’

The man was still smiling as he rose to his feet. ‘Girl, I make this crap up as I go along. Now, let me tell you what I think.’

‘Please,’ Kys said.

‘I think there’s a very good chance you’re an associate of Gideon Ravenor, the rogue inquisitor. We’re very keen to speak with him. Actually, that’s a lie. We’re very keen to kill him in the most painful and permanent way imaginable. I know it must be very hard to contemplate giving up a friend, betraying them and their confidences. Ravenor’s probably your mentor, right? Father-figure? Beloved leader? But I tell you what, you’ll be so grateful that you did.’

‘My name is Merit Yevins,’ Kys said.

Suldon pointed at her and winked. 'I love it when they play hard-to-get. We can bring in a psyker any time, rip the truth from your boiling skull. But I have a better idea. It'll involve a lot less mopping the floor.'

He looked at the freckled man. 'Brade? Go get prisoner AA-15 and bring him here.'

Brade nodded, waved the actuator wand to open the door, and left.

'You're going to love this bit,' Suldon told her. 'Brace yourself. Don't make this too easy for me.' He took a palm-sized scanner pad out of his jacket pocket. 'Bio-metric reader,' he said. 'Set to register physiological changes like heart rate, pupil dilation, breathing fluctuations and skips in synapse activity.'

'Truth reader,' said Kys.

'That's right,' Suldon nodded. 'It reaction-scans even non-verbal responses. Don't worry, it's not for you.'

The hatch opened again. Brade re-entered. 'In here,' he said.

A small figure shuffled in behind him. He was shackled at the wrists and ankles, his depth of stride seriously restricted. His head was bowed. What was left of his uniform was torn, and from the bruises and dried blood caking his flesh, it was clear he had been severely beaten more than once in the last few days. Fresh purple contusions mottled older, yellowing bruises. Hideous gashes, each more than a week old, crusted the man's chest and shoulders. Something had been used to sever the fourth and ring fingers of both his hands.

When he looked up, his face was a swollen black gourd of bruising and half-dosed, bloodshot eyes.

Even so, he was still recognisable.

It was Shipmaster Sholto Unwerth.

HIS FINGERS STEEPLD together, his chin resting on his thumbs, Orfeo Culzean slowly looked up from the regicide board in front of him. The game was set on a little turntable, and Culzean was tournamenting himself.

He rose to his feet. The hotel suite was quiet, except for a delicate sonata by Hanz Solveig that Culzean had left playing at low volume.

‘Hello,’ he said.

‘I let myself in,’ said Toros Revoke.

Culzean recognised him instantly. It was the man who had gone head-to-head with the Brass Thief at the diplomatic palace.

‘I’m sure you did,’ said Culzean. ‘I’ve been expecting you, actually. It’s a pleasure to meet you.’

Revoke half-nodded. ‘You are Orfeo Culzean?’

‘Yes, I am. You?’

‘Toros Revoke. You seem remarkably composed, Culzean. Considering your situation.’

‘And what is that, exactly?’ Culzean asked.

‘Precarious,’ smiled Revoke.

‘Would you like a drink?’ Culzean asked. ‘Perhaps an appetiser?’

‘I’m fine,’ said Revoke. The little simivulpa was hiding under one of the chairs, hissing at the secretist in pure malice.

‘Stop that,’ Culzean shushed. ‘So, let’s get to business, shall we?’

‘Business?’ Revoke echoed. ‘There is no transaction here. You speak like you have some leverage. You do not. I... visited your employers at the lighthouse in Q this evening. They are all dead now.’

‘I expect so. You are a dangerous man.’

‘Thank you. Their leader, Magus-clancular Cornelius Lezzard – as he kept reminding us – remained alive long enough to tell me all about you. By the end, he was quite desperate to tell me, in fact.’

Culzean walked over to the sideboard. ‘Do you mind?’ he asked.

Revoke shook his head. Culzean poured himself an amasec, trying hard not to give away how much his hands were shaking.

‘You are a facilitator, an expeditor, and you work for cult concerns such as the Divine Fraternity, so long as they can afford your fees.’

‘Yes, sir. That is what I do.’

‘You make things happen.’

Culzean took a sip of his drink, breathed deeply and nodded. ‘I have skills and means. If something needs to be facilitated, I’m the one people come to.’

‘According to Lezzard, the Divine Fraternity was concerned with the birthing or manifestation of a daemon called Slyte, whose occurrence they had foreseen. They employed you to make this happen. The birth of this daemon was tied into the activities of Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor, who currently acts against my interests. So that made me and my commander, the chief provost... how did Lezzard put it? It made us *negative determiners*. Is that right?’

‘It is.’

‘And that’s why you unleashed an incunabula to kill the chief provost?’

Culzean took another sip. ‘Naturally. It was the most expeditious option. But you stopped it. I watched you. It was very impressive. I should like to know how you did that, Master Revoke. As a result, the determiners changed slightly.’

‘Favourably, I gather. Lezzard was quite clear that, despite the failure of your attack, this Slyte was quantifiably more likely to be manifested.’

Culzean set down his empty glass and shook his head. ‘Throne, sir. You really must have hurt Magus Lezzard to get him to tell you this.’

Revoke shrugged. ‘I left it to the experts. I can tell you he was in forty-six separated parts when he died.’

Culzean shuddered. ‘And is that going to be my fate too, Master Revoke?’

‘You know, I should think so.’

The connecting door from the bedrooms opened suddenly and Leyla Slade came in. ‘Orfeo, I heard voices and—’

Her handgun was drawn in a nano-second. Revoke was faster. With his telekinesis, he threw Slade against the wall, smashing a gilt-framed mirror, and seized her. Slowly, unwillingly, Slade raised the gun and aimed it at her own forehead.

‘Don’t,’ said Culzean.

‘You’re in no position to bargain,’ Revoke said.

Culzean poured himself a second amasec. ‘Actually, what do you know? I am. Don’t. Let her be. I’m serious.’

Revoke let Slade go, and plucked her gun right across the room into his hand.

‘I’ll listen once, Culzean. Go on.’

‘Well, here it is,’ Culzean replied, taking his glass and walking over to the settee. He sat down, crossed his legs, seeming utterly relaxed. ‘His magnificence Jader Trice, and the entire body of the Ministry of Subsector Trade – of which you are a servant – are engaged in some activity that... well, let’s put this fairly. If the ordos knew what you were up to, they would purge this planet by Exterminatus. Just for starters.’

He knocked back his glass.

‘So, by way of insurance, you understand, expecting you to come for me, I have prepared a document outlining all I know about your activities. This document is being held in trust by a third party – a major subsector banking house, just so you know. Every hour, on the hour, I send them a ciphered message. All the while I do, they retain the document. If I miss just one cipher, the document will be sent directly, by astropath, to the Inquisition on Thracian Primaris. I’m just guessing, but I think that would rather spoil your endeavours here.’

Revoke said nothing.

‘So, this does become business. There is a transaction, after all. You tell me what you want, and I’ll tell you what I can give.’

Revoke turned and shot a mind-nudge out of the room. A few seconds later, the chamber doors opened and Boneheart entered, followed by four secretists lugging the coffer.

They set it down and backed away. Revoke opened the lid.

Inside sat the pyramidal device wrought of brass and the trigger-orb.

‘This is the incunabula you used against my Master Trice?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘It can find any target, anywhere, no matter how well hidden said target is?’

Culzean nodded. ‘That’s what it does. The Thief doesn’t need an address. The warp shows it where to go.’

‘I want you to use it to find and destroy Ravenor,’ Revoke said.

‘And in return?’

‘In return?’

‘My payment,’ Culzean said. ‘I want a piece of what you have. My terms are these. I will destroy Ravenor, but in payment I want Enuncia.’

Revoke stared at him.

‘Yes or no,’ said Culzean. ‘I want Enuncia. You’ve decoded the fundamental controls of reality. I want to share in that. Say yes and I will operate this shining weapon for you. Say no and you might as well leave now and watch your backs for the black ships and their virus bombs.’

‘My answer is yes,’ Revoke said.

‘Excellent. That’s business done. Now get the hell out of my chambers. I’ll join you in an hour or so.’

Revoke nodded to Boneheart and the secretists carried the coffer back out. Revoke paused in the doorway. ‘Any tricks, Culzean, and I will kill you.’

‘I should hope so,’ Culzean said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

As soon as the secretists had left, Culzean hurried over to Leyla Slade and helped her to her feet.

‘That was a lie, wasn’t it?’ she said.

‘What?’

‘All that stuff about ciphered documents held by banking houses. You never did that.’

‘A bluff. Ley, not a lie. They’re quite different things.’

‘Whatever you say.’

‘What I say now is, let’s unlock some of our other weapons. Just in case.’

SULDON WAVED THE scanner pad at Unwerth.

‘You know,’ he said. ‘He’s good. Not even a twitch of recognition. Unfortunately, the scanner says otherwise. A massive brain spike. Synapses firing all over the place. He knows you. He really does.’

Unwerth looked up at Kys, his face a pitiful mess.

‘I furnish you with all apologems,’ he hissed through his split mouth. ‘I never ever intended to affect your betrayness.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Kys said.

Suldon took out his hand-vox. ‘Revoke? Yes? It’s me. Suldon. In the holding cells. Looks like we’ve got one of Ravenor’s team here. Yeah, locked up. No, she definitely checks out. One of Ravenor’s. Absolutely. All right. As soon as you get here.’

Suldon shut his vox and popped it in his pocket. He looked at Unwerth.

‘Get him out of here,’ he said.

Brade waved the wand at the hatch and it opened. He jostled Unwerth towards the door.

‘One thing,’ Kys said.

‘What?’ asked Suldon.

‘That subliminal you thought I’d picked up. I remember now how it sounded.’

Patience Kys looked Suldon in the face and said it.



SEVEN

IT WASN'T A word. It wasn't even so much a proper sound. Just giving voice to it made her mouth hurt.

But it did a lot more to Suldon. He instantly, explosively vomited, then fell onto his knees, clutching at his belly, violently retching up his stomach contents.

Kys was already moving past him. At the open hatch, Brade was turning fast, drawing a handgun from inside his coat. Kys slammed into him, driving him round against the brick wall of the cell. She grabbed the wrist of the hand holding the gun with both of her cuffed hands, and simultaneously smashed her left knee into Brade's kidneys. He grunted, back arching, and she drove his gun-hand into the wall, scraping his knuckles across the rough, whitewashed brick. Immediately, he dropped the weapon, screaming out in pain. He tried to pivot, to swing her off him. Still holding his wrist, she shoulder-barged him face-first into the wall.

Suldon was back on his feet, closing, drawing his own gun. Kys let go of Brade's wrist, clamped her hands on his shoulder for leverage, and threw herself out into a horizontal body spin. Her bare legs, scissor-kicking, whirled into Suldon, smacking his gun away across the cell and fracturing his cheekbone. He reeled backwards.

But her hold on Brade was weakened. He clawed around, grabbing at her, catching hold of the collar of her paper gown. The left shoulder and sleeve tore away. Kys kicked him in the belly, then grabbed him around the sides of the head with her cuffed hands as he doubled over. She delivered a sharp, vicious twist, snatching the force of it through her arms and her upper body, and broke his neck.

Brade toppled over. Kys had just enough time to duck as Suldon threw a punch at her and, knotting her hands together, drove a blow into his ribs. He staggered back against the wall, flailing out for her. With a growl, she sprang at him, hands outstretched like a diver. Her hands slid either side of his neck, and the metal binder linking them rammed into his throat, smacking his head back against the wall. Suldon made a silent, gagging noise, grappling at her arms. She pushed harder, until the palms of her hands were flat against the wall either side of his head and the binder all but buried in the flesh of his neck. His face went purple and he stopped struggling.

Kys let go and stood back. Suldon slid down the wall into a sitting position, his head flopping over onto one side.

Sholto Unwerth stood in the open doorway, just staring. He looked as if he wasn't taking much in, as if the world had become a place incomprehensible to him.

Kys walked across the cell and picked up the actuator wand Brade had dropped. She fiddled with the settings then triggered it, and her binders automatically unlocked and fell off. She tossed the wand to Unwerth and he caught it.

‘Get your shackles off. Quickly now.’

Blinking, he did as he was told. She searched the bodies. Apart from some spare change and a pack of lhos, they weren't carrying much of anything. She took one of the pistols, a sleek little snub-las, and a spare power cell.

Unwerth had freed himself. ‘What... what pertains now?’ he asked.

‘We're getting out of here,’ Kys said.

‘I do not deserve... that is to speak, I have dishonoured my service to you and your particulars. I never meant to envocal any materialisms, for I undertook my compactness with your master in most high seriousness. But they hurt me. They hurt me and—’

‘Shut up,’ said Kys. ‘Face the wall, please.’

He did so. Kys pulled the torn paper gown off over her head. Both Brade and Suldon were far too big to trade clothes with, but Suldon's suit jacket buttoned up, was like a coat on her. She tucked the weapon and the power cell into one pocket, and carried the wand in her left hand.

'Come on,' she said. 'Do exactly what I tell you and don't speak.'

Unwerth nodded.

Her own mouth still tingled oddly from the curious thing she had said. Patience had a nasty feeling she was beginning to understand what was going on in the administries of Eustis Majoris. If she was right, then the possibilities were terrifying.

She peered out into the hall. A simple corridor, the locked hatches of other cells on either side. No one around.

With Unwerth in tow, she shut the cell behind her with the wand and started to walk.

IN THE EAST, the last vestiges of the storm were grumbling in the low cloud like slow-motion firecrackers. A light rain persisted in the air, enough to keep the alarm posts flashing. The late evening was dark and murky.

Nayl came up the steps of the transit station, and onto an empty street walk. Not even gampers out at this hour. He sheltered under a glass rain cover and coded his hand-vox by the light of the nearby street lamp. Up ahead, the towering peak of Administry Tower Three was visible against the night sky only because of its millions of window lights.

'It's Nayl. Anything yet?'

'No, Harlon. Still nothing.'

'I'm in the tower approaches now. I can wait here all night if necessary.'

'Understood. I'll let you know as soon as we get anything.'

Nayl put his vox away and stared up at the lights.

'Come on, Patience,' he murmured. 'Come on, girl. Give us a sign.'

THOUGH SHE HATED to admit it, Kara suspected Belknap knew what he was talking about. There was something infinitely reassuring and calming about the candlelit majesty of a great Ecclesiarchy building.

Nightsong was due to commence in a few minutes, and a small congregation was gathering. Knowing that the temple elders would look unfavourably on a hand-vox chiming in the middle of mass, Kara went back out into the towering vestibule and made a call.

‘Kara. Have you heard anything from Patience yet?’

‘We haven’t, I’m afraid,’ I told her.

‘Look, just so you know, my hand-vox will be switched off for the next half an hour or so.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m attending nightsong,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to disturb the ceremony.’

A pause. ‘I don’t remember you ever attending night-song, Kara.’

She felt awkward suddenly. ‘I just... I just felt like it, Gideon. Belknap suggested that a little religious observance might be good for my soul and help with the healing process. He’s quite old-fashioned, I think. Anyway, the idea appealed to me. I’m such a heathen most of the time. Besides, all of us could do with a prayer or a blessing right now, couldn’t we?’

‘I suppose so. Kara, is there something you’re not telling me?’

‘No,’ she laughed. ‘Don’t be silly.’

‘There’s something in your voice...’

‘Honestly, Gideon.’ She glanced at the guide pamphlet she’d taken from a nearby table. ‘I’m just deciding... deciding whether to take nightsong here in the grand templum or next door in the sacristy.’

‘WHAT DID YOU say just then?’ I asked. Carl and Zeph looked over at me.

‘I said I’m just deciding whether to—’

‘No, at the end there. Did you say “sacristy”?’ Zael got up from the sofa and walked right over to my side.

‘Yes, the old sacristy. It adjoins the grand templum according to this guide, but it’s much older. I quite like the sound of it.’

‘I told you,’ Zael said. ‘I told you. I had a dream.’

‘Kara?’ I said on the link. ‘Can you tell me why you’re there?’

‘Because Belknap—’

‘No, Kara. That place especially. You say you’re at the grand templum. That’s in Formal A, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. What’s the matter?’

‘Why there?’

There was a hesitation on the line. ‘Belknap suggested I should go to temple for the good of my soul. So I thought, if I’m going to do that, I might as well go to the biggest. That’s here. The grand templum. Gideon, have I done something wrong?’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘But you may have done something very right. Kara, as you’re there, could you do something for me?’

‘Anything.’

‘Could you go to this old sacristy for me and take a look around. Just take a look.’

‘All right. Can I ask why?’

I was aware of Zael’s bright eyes staring down at me.

‘It’s probably nothing. Just an odd coincidence. But there’s also a chance, just a chance, that we’re experiencing some confluence of fate. Something preordained. Something Zael saw in a dream.’

‘I see. Well, all right.’

‘Just check it out for me. If the God-Emperor or His agencies of fortune are smiling our way, I’d like to take advantage of it. Like you said, we could all use a blessing right now.’

‘I’ll take a look and call back shortly,’ she said and closed the link.

‘What was that about?’ Carl asked me.

‘I’ll tell you if it turns into anything,’ I said. ‘Still nothing from Patience?’

Carl shook his head. ‘Something else, though,’ he said. ‘I’ve had my cogitator’s support engines processing the material Kys sent us all evening, trying to translate it or make some sense out of it.’

‘And?’

‘Still no sense. It’s absolutely meaningless. Random. Except...’

‘What?’ asked Zeph.

‘It’s burned out the support engines. Completely erased the index drive. They both just died on me five minutes ago.’

FOUR MEN IN dark suits went by, their feet clattering on the stone floor. Once they were out of sight, Kys and Unwerth came out of cover and moved on. She wasn’t sure if it was just terror, or a fierce determination to do as she had told him, but Unwerth was managing to be very stealthy. He slipped from shadow to shadow, watching for her every gesture. She felt sorry for him. She’d loathed him during the voyage, but now realised he was touchingly loyal. He had suffered so much because of them.

I’m going to get you out, she decided. I’m going to get you to safety, Master Unwerth. It’s the very least I can do.

They crept along the dark passageways of the secretist enclave. They sidled past open doorways that looked into rooms where hard-faced personnel worked at data-engine consoles, rooms where men in protective clothing bent over sheets of paper laid out on underlit glass tables, rooms that looked like library annexes, rooms where pneumatic tubes delivered message cylinders into racks for the operators to open and sort.

Kys could hear a distant humming, a vibration that quivered the floor, as if heavy machinery was working nearby. She pointed the actuator wand at a wall panel and lit up a hololithic building plan in the air. *Hangar*. That was what she wanted. Two floors up, a stairwell just along to—

Someone was coming. She wanded open a door and pulled Unwerth into the shadows of the arch. Two secretists went past, cannon-hounds straining at their leashes.

They stopped a few metres beyond the doorway, starting a conversation with someone they'd met coming the other way. Kys heard one of the secretists snap at his servitor to heel.

No going that way.

She took Unwerth by the hand, shuddering a little as her grip encountered his missing fingers. She led him along the dark passage behind the door she'd wanded open. The humming grew louder.

The tunnel broke at a T-junction. They went right, and she wanded open another hatch.

The chamber beyond was enormous. They were overlooking it from a gantry walk. This was the source of the noise.

Below them, a large number of gigantic machines rattled and spun, circling streams of light and coherent energy around their spindles and rushing gears. Tiny figures moved around the machines beneath them, adjusting and fine-tuning the rate of flow. Processing flow.

Kys did a quick calculation and counted sixty machines. Data-looms. The secretists had sixty data-looms, working in unison.

'Holy Throne,' Kys breathed. Even the Administratum centre on Thracian Primaris only had four looms to process the planetary data-flow. Carl had once told her that Scarus itself boasted thirty looms, through which the accumulated business of the sector was handled. The stuff he knew.

Sixty looms...

'Not this way then,' she smiled at Unwerth. They turned back and headed up the tunnel again. The tech-adept coming around the corner nearly slammed into them.

'Who—' he began to say. She coshed him with the wand, and then shot him through the temple with her snub-las once he was on the ground. The background roar of the looms covered the brief report.

They hurried on up the tunnel to another hatch. She checked the nearest wall-panel again, studying the hololith.

'Stairwell,' she said. 'This is good. We can reach the hangar from here.'

‘That is most profuse,’ Unwerth nodded.

Kys waved the actuator wand at the hatch. Nothing happened. She did it again, and again. Then she tapped the wand and examined it.

The casing was fractured. Some of the studs no longer worked. Clubbing the adept with it had been a bad idea.

‘Oh, for Throne’s sake,’ she hissed. ‘Give me a break...’

She looked round. Unwerth had disappeared.

‘Sholto?’ she growled, taking out her weapon. ‘Sholto, Throne help me, where the hell have you—’

He hurried back into view out of the tunnel’s shadows. He was clutching a small, battered tool kit that he’d recovered from the dead adept.

‘In all pertinacity—’ he began.

‘Don’t even start. Can you open this door?’ Kys snapped.

Unwerth knelt down, opened the tool kit and produced a powerdriver.

‘Let’s see,’ he said. ‘Cross your fingers. I would, but unfortunately I don’t have enough—’

‘My fingers are crossed, Sholto. Do it.’



EIGHT

BONEHEART AND MOLAY were waiting for Revoke in the bustling main hall as he stepped out of the elevator.

‘Is he here?’ Revoke asked.

‘Arrived ten minutes ago,’ Boneheart said. ‘We put him in private audience three. Monicker’s watching him.’

‘He sent a list of instructions,’ Molay said. ‘*Requirements*, is what he called them. I have to say, he’s got some front. But we’re working to meet them.’

Revoke nodded.

‘Do you trust him?’ Boneheart asked.

‘His abilities?’ Revoke said. ‘Yes. I’ve done some background. His credentials are impeccable. He’s the best there is. Do I trust him as a person? No, not at all. But we’re going with it anyway.’

The three of them started to walk. ‘There’s another thing,’ Boneheart said. ‘We picked up a girl from Administry Tower Three today. Seemed like a regular sublim event at first, but we’re pretty sure she’s one of Ravenor’s people.’

‘I know,’ said Revoke. ‘Suldon called me direct. The telekine, right?’

Boneheart nodded. ‘Thing is, Toros, if there was any doubt she was one of Ravenor’s own, it’s gone now. Routine cell check found Suldon and Brade dead. She’s loose.’

Revoke stopped. ‘Loose in here?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Damn it. I’ve got to do this thing now and with any luck it’ll make using the telekine redundant. Ravenor should be dead by morning. But find her. The both of you. Personally see to it she’s caught and killed.’

Boneheart and Molay nodded.

Behind them, an elevator hatch opened and the chief provost stepped out. All the junior servants in the hall stopped what they were doing and curtsayed or bowed.

‘Get lost,’ Revoke whispered to Boneheart and Molay. ‘I’ve got this to handle.’

They nodded and hurried off.

Trice advanced across the hall to join Revoke. Trice was wearing his most opulent robes of office, and three servo-skulls circled around him. A senior cipherist, in a hooded cape of red velvet, followed him, bearing a small metal casket with reverence.

‘Toros,’ Trice smiled.

‘He’s waiting for us, sir,’ Revoke replied, bowing.

‘Then I’m eager to get this over with. I’ve just been with the Diadochoi. He’s in an especially foul mood. It seems he’s heard rumours of a problem, and is annoyed that I’m withholding the details. I’ve tried to be circumspect. If he discovers Ravenor is active and hunting here on Eustis, he’ll lose it completely. You know how he is about Ravenor.’

‘Sir.’

‘So, if I’m going to tell him anything, I’d like it to be that there *was* a problem, but now it’s done. I’d like to tell him Ravenor is dead.’

‘Then let’s make that happen,’ Revoke suggested. He opened the door to private audience three and ushered Trice and the cipherist inside.

Monicker was standing just inside the room, a fizzle of empty air. She bowed.

At the far end of the long table sat Orfeo Culzean. Leyla Slade stood behind him, her arms folded as tightly as her expression.

Revoke closed the door and sealed it.

‘Chief provost,’ Culzean said, rising to his feet and bowing gently. ‘An honour.’

‘Master Culzean,’ Trice replied. ‘I have heard a lot about you.’

‘All bad, I hope,’ Culzean replied. ‘Let me start by saying, just for the record, the attempt on your life that I orchestrated... Well, that was nothing personal.’

‘Understood.’

They shook hands.

‘Sit, please,’ Trice said. Revoke pulled out a chair to accommodate the chief provost.

‘You have a problem,’ Culzean began, leaning forward and clasping his hands together. ‘An individual, let’s call him Subject R.’

‘Let’s call him That Bastard Ravenor,’ Trice smiled.

Culzean nodded and grinned back. ‘So noted. An individual that you want to track, locate and destroy. I have the means to achieve this. The skills, the weapons. I’ve already forwarded my requirements to your people. I trust they’re all to your satisfaction?’

Trice sat back. ‘How will you find him? We’ve searched, but so far we’ve failed.’

‘With respect, sir,’ Culzean said. ‘You’ve used psykers, as I understand it. Ravenor is too skilful to fall for that. My intel shows he uses untouchables, a resource he inherited from his mentor, Eisenhorn. With an untouchable active nearby, Ravenor would be just a blank to the very best of your mind-slaves. He’s cunning, sir, he blocks his mind from prying eyes.’

‘So how do you intend to locate him, Master Culzean?’

‘I will be using the Thief, chief provost. An incunabula. I believe you are aware of its work.’

‘Too well,’ Trice said, with a tiny smile.

‘Shielded or not, untouchable or not untouchable, the Thief will locate him. It’s what it does. The Thief will certainly find Ravenor. And therein lies the quandary.’

‘How so?’ Trice asked.

‘Under regular circumstances, the Thief is summoned and controlled. This means it must be fed, and then instructed. The control apparatus requires a talented psyker to direct the Thief. However, that control will be lost if the Thief enters the range of Ravenor’s untouchable. In other words, we can unleash the Thief, send him after Ravenor, and then lose possession of him the moment he comes close to the target.’

‘So how do you propose we do this?’ asked Trice.

Culzean shrugged. ‘Here’s where the give and take comes in, sir. With your help, I can instruct the Thief in a different way. No need for feeding no need for psyker manipulation. We command it using Enuncia.’

Trice paused. ‘Revoke told me you were remarkably well informed about our work here.’

‘I like to be well informed,’ Culzean said. ‘It was a chance deduction, actually. I observed Master Revoke’s efforts against the Brass Thief, and Enuncia was the only thing he could conceivably have been using.’

‘That’s quite a deduction,’ Revoke said. ‘Enuncia is extremely obscure, its appearance in Imperial records fragmentary. Even the most learned people have never even heard of it.’

Culzean maintained his calm, cordial manner. ‘I am a specialist operator in the workings of the arcane, Master Revoke. I am not most people. There are of course many things I don’t have an answer to. For example – as you said, there are probably no more than two dozen references to Enuncia in all of the Imperial archives, and all of those in extremely restricted works. Only a couple of those references actually contain any operable semantics or accidence. I presume therefore you have uncovered a significant new lexical source for you to be so fluent?’

‘In a way,’ Trice said. ‘But more by reconstruction than recovery. If our relationship bears fruit, Master Culzean, we will unfold the truth for you.’

‘That’s all I ask,’ said Culzean. ‘Bring me in on Enuncia and I’ll deliver anything you want. Call it payment for dealing with Ravenor.’

‘Done,’ said Trice simply. ‘And as a gesture of good faith...’ He nodded to the waiting cipherist. The cipherist opened the metal box and showed

Culzean what lay within.

‘The commands required for the incunabula,’ Trice said. ‘Written in Enuncia and inscribed on an inert metal wafer. Don’t try to read it. Revoke will do that for you. He’s trained.’

‘Well, this is wonderful,’ Culzean said. ‘Let’s get started.’

‘Toros?’ Trice said as he got to his feet. ‘Have the psykers woken and brought to readiness.’

‘There’s no need, sir,’ Culzean said.

‘Maybe not, but I’d like them ready anyway,’ Trice straightened his gown. ‘If the Thief leads us to Ravenor, and Ravenor drops his guard, I want my psykers right there to finish the job.’

THE CHOIR WAS singing the nightsong counterpart. The sound rose into the upper rafters of the grand templum, pure and clear.

Kara walked out of the west entrance and along a cloister towards the old sacristy. In the blackness, the distant sound of the choir seemed like a mournful wind. Kara had her hand on the butt of her weapon.

There was nothing out here except darkness and dripping rain. The path was blocked with saw-horses and a sign read, ‘Old sacristy closed for renovations’.

She turned back, reaching for her hand-vox.

Behind her two, quick cracks of las-fire. Running feet in the dark.

She drew her weapon and ducked into cover. Another two snip-shots, blinking in the darkness. More pounding feet, clattering over gravel.

A figure appeared, walking right past her. A young man, skinny, with augmetic eyes. He was walking strangely, plodding, trudging almost. As he went by Kara’s hiding place, something fell out of his hand and bounced on the path.

A compact eight mil.

The young man fell over and lay still.

She crept over to him, rolled him over. His body was going cold. Two huge laser wounds had cut through his torso.

‘Oh, Throne,’ Kara said as her hand came up wet with blood.

There was someone behind her. She turned and saw the muzzle of a Tronsvasse 9 aiming right at her head.

‘You bitch,’ said a voice. ‘You killed him. You bloody killed Limbwall! You bitch!’

‘Now wait—’ Kara began.

Gunfire drowned her words.

WIND GUSTED OVER the rooftop landing pad. Culzean had insisted that the ritual had to be performed in the open. A ring of taper-flares had been lit, blue luminosity wafting up into the high-level air as smoke.

The wrought pyramid of the incunabula sat in the centre of the ring.

‘Master Revoke?’ Culzean said. ‘Begin please.’

Revoke took the inert metal wafer from the cipherist’s open coffer and stepped forward.

He read the words aloud. His lips split and blood leaked down the sides of his mouth.

The Brass Thief exploded into being and surged up into the night sky.

THE HATCH, ONCE Unwerth had fiddled with it, opened. The hangar lay before them. One end opened to the sky and a row of armoured fliers sat in heavy deck clamps in front of the bay’s mouth. They started to run across the empty deckway towards the nearest flier.

A las-bolt smacked into the deck close to Unwerth, who jumped back with a squeal. Kys threw herself into him and rolled them into the cover of a repair cart. More shots zipped over them. From a hatch in the far corner of the hangar, a half-dozen secretists were running forward, firing.

Kys pulled her snub-las and returned shots over the cart, forcing the secretists to scatter into cover themselves.

‘Get in! Get it fired up!’ she yelled at Unwerth. He crawled on his belly into the shadow of the deck clamp and reached up to fuss with the flier’s door latches. More shots rained at them. One blew the lid off one of the repair cart’s panniers, another chipped the bodywork of the flier. Kys leaned out and raked fire back at them. She clipped one of the secretists as he attempted to rush into better cover.

‘Unwerth?’

The doors popped. Unwerth wriggled up into the tight cockpit. Kys fired off another salvo of shots and leapt in after him.

‘Now!’ Kys yelled. Shots were spanking off the rear of the machine. The window panel of one of the open doors shattered.

‘You requisite me to fly this?’ Unwerth asked.

‘Yes I sodding requisite so! Get us out of here!’

Unwerth thumped main power with his maimed hand. He grabbed the stick as the flier shot itself off the deck clamp. Safety systems auto-closed the doors. The flier, nose down, barrelled out under the arch of the hangar mouth and into the night sky.

Either deliberately or accidentally – Kys couldn’t tell – Unwerth pitched them into a steep dive. The vast lit side of the governor’s palace rushed past behind them like an illuminated cliff. Below, the canyons of the hive’s upper stacks yawned. Unwerth turned them down into an upper alt traffic flow. Fliers and lifters zipped about them. The collision alarm made at least three warning bleats.

‘Where?’ he asked, desperately.

‘Where what?’

‘Where would you produce us to go?’

‘Uhm...’ Kys began.

BACK IN THE hangar, Molay turned to Boneheart, who had just entered at a run.

‘They’ve effected exit!’ Molay said. ‘Flier eighty-seven. We’ve got it tagged.’

Foelon, holding his psyber lure, was right behind Boneheart.

‘Sing them in,’ Boneheart ordered.

Foelon began to spin the lure.

Outside, swirling dark clouds billowed from the roofs-capes and gargoyle-encrusted rain-gutters of the stack tops. The clouds coiled through the air like smoke wound into a vortex by an updraft, and fused into one.

The Unkindness of sheen birds, turning together in a dense, unified swarm, swept down towards the speeding flier.

‘UNWERTH! WATCH IT!’ Kys yelled. ‘What the hell is—’

The first two or three smacked against the flier’s canopy, cracking the glass.

‘Bother,’ said Unwerth, wrestling with the stick.

Then the rest came in, like a wave, like a chrome blizzard. Kys saw them coming, their wings glinting in the darkness.

‘Oh shit,’ she said.

KARA DRAGGED THE girl into cover as the shots ripped past.

‘Stay down!’ she said, and fired off a clip into the darkness of the cloister. Silence, briefly, then confused shouts.

‘Move!’ Kara cried. The girl came with her. They sprinted down the outside walk of the grand templum.

Behind them, they could hear feet crunching on gravel. Another shot or two sang out.

‘Throne! Do you have an exit plan?’ Kara yelled.

‘My transporter! It’s just down here!’

They ran down an unlit side street to the parked Bergman. The running footsteps were closing behind them. Kara jumped in the moment the doors unlocked. The girl put it into drive and they roared down the street and out across the square. She had to haul on the wheel to avoid a big grey transporter that was just pulling out of the templum’s front approach.

‘That way!’ Kara shouted, pointing. The girl heaved the speeding vehicle round, its back-end sliding out slightly on the wet stone, and hammered them away down a link ramp towards the inter-formal arterial. Several transporters braked and sounded their horns as the Bergman dashed by, ignoring all the circulation control lights.

‘You drive like a marshal,’ Kara said.

‘I am a marshal.’

‘I’m Kara Swole. You?’

‘Maud Plyton.’

A laser bolt punched through the roof and out through the front screen. Plyton yelped and swerved.

The big grey transporter, with a man leaning out of the side window, training a hellgun, rushed down the high stack ramp after the speeding Bergman.

The hellgun began to fire again.



NINE

‘SIGNAL FROM KARA,’ Carl said suddenly. ‘She’s in some kind of trouble.’

‘Let me speak to her,’ I said.

Carl didn’t get a chance to obey my instruction. The vox systems let out a painfully loud wail of distortion, and died. Simultaneously, Carl’s cogitators flickered and shut down. The house lights dimmed.

‘Oh, really not good...’ Carl began.

‘The stuff you know,’ Mathuin growled. He was already running from the room.

‘We’re under attack,’ Zael said.

‘It could be almost anything—’ I started to say.

Zael looked at me with a cold, calm certainty. ‘No, I’m telling you. We’re under attack.’

Outside the room, downstairs, a terrible rending impact sounded from the main door. The security systems warbled fitfully for a second and died. More crashing, tearing noises resounded.

I sped out of the room. ‘Carl, keep Zael here with you. Do everything you can to keep him safe.’

Carl had already drawn his handgun, and pulled Zael over into the corner of the room away from the doorway. Frauka hurried out after me and slammed the door.

I went out onto the landing and began to glide down the stairs. From halfway down, I could see the main body of the entrance hall and what was left of the front doors.

And I could see what was approaching across the hall.

It was the thing I’d sensed the fibre-traces of at the diplomatic palace. The primeval throwback. The incunabula. A figure of gold and smoking

brass, its helm high-crested and devoid of any mark except narrow eye-slits. It had broken in through the heavy wood and metal of the doorway, littering the floor with debris, and now padded forward, shoulders hunched, the crested helm switching to and fro. Gusting eddies of warp-vapour clung to its limbs like streamers.

It looked up and saw me on the stairs. It raised its hands, and with an odd wet click, extended paired rhyming swords.

Behind me, I heard Frauka gasp, 'Bollocks to this.'

'Get back, Wystan,' I said. With his limiter still off, I had no defence capabilities whatsoever.

The incunabula flew at me, its swords coming together to form a two-pronged spear held out in front of it.

A shockwave of immense firepower blew it backwards out of the air and clean across the hall, through a wall, into the lower lounge.

Zeph Mathuin strode forward across the hall below me, his rotator cannon slung in place, the multi-barrels still spinning as he came. He fired another blurt, destroying more of the wall, the rotating muzzles kicking out star-shaped flashes of ignited gas.

'Get out of here,' Mathuin yelled without looking up at us. 'Get out while you still can.'

A scratching, slithering sound came from inside the lower lounge and the incunabula reappeared. There were sooty marks on its chest plating, but no sign it had been damaged at all. Mathuin opened fire again and threw it backwards once more, walking forward to press his attack, mercilessly blasting streams of high-velocity shells at the golden killer. It reeled, bucked, jerked, unable to ignore the kinetic impact, but was still undamaged.

Gradually, it began to crunch towards Mathuin, one foot after the other, weathering the blizzard of shots like a man trudging head down into torrential rain. The rotator gears of Zeph's cannon were whirring shrilly. It was close to overheating, running out of ammunition, or both.

Three metres from Mathuin, two, shrugging off the hail of shells one struggling step at a time.

‘Wystan!’ I yelled. ‘Activate! Activate!’

The Brass Thief sliced around with its right-hand blade and cut Zeph’s rotator cannon in half. In the explosion that resulted, shards of shrapnel burst out of the ruined mechanism. Mathuin was thrown almost the full length of the hall. The incunabula ignored him and swung back to face me.

I was what it was after. Just me.

But now Wystan had activated his limiter. My mind surged free, unrestrained. With a pop, the psy-cannon deployed from the chair’s casing and I began to fire. My first two shots actually managed to dent its chest plating. My third slightly buckled its left cheek and left a scratch on the brass.

Still it came on.

IN THE CHILLY basement vault of the governor’s palace, the five psykers began to mumble and thrash in their lead tanks. Revoke pushed two of the handlers aside and took a look at the biometric display. Nearby Culzean smiled and simply clapped his hands together. He already knew what was happening.

‘We’ve forced his hand,’ Culzean said. ‘Ravenor can’t deal with the Thief without his mind powers. He’s told his untouchable to limit. He should be very visible to you now.’

‘Is he?’ Trice asked.

Revoke nodded. ‘Ultra-solid return. A house in Formal E, ninth ward. I’m despatching elements right now.’

‘Never mind that,’ Trice said. ‘Send the psykers in.’

FOR A MOMENT, for a fleeting second, I thought I had the measure of this monstrous incunabula. I was pinning it with my mind as I fired cannon shot after cannon shot into it, actually splintering slivers of gold off its armour. It fought back to break my grip on it with furious power, but my

will was no trifling thing. I actually had it fast, tight in a vice of psy-energy—

Then the psykers swirled in. Bodiless, they burst into Miserimus all around me, streaking comets of vile white light that swirled and circled and laughed with gleeful inhuman voices. Every lamp, window, glow-globe and drinking glass in the house shattered. Floorboards ripped up like twigs. Doors burst off their hinges. Flying nails and screws and tacks peppered through the air like hail. The banisters behind me collapsed and I heard Frauka cry out as he was thrown off the stairs into the hall below.

‘Wystan!’

He was unconscious, or dead. Either way, he couldn’t deactivate his limiter and block these unholy wraiths out.

Two fell upon me at once, amorphous, crackling skeins of corposant coating the surface of my chair in heavy crusts of ice. They shook at me, ripping at my mind.

A mind that was already more than occupied holding the incunabula at bay.

The pain was immense. Invisible talons, cold as the intercosmic chill, tore through the outer defences of my soul. Peals of mirthless laughter echoed in from distant, insane worlds of warp-horror and abomination.

I tried to drive them back, prise their clammy grip off my shuddering mind. But it took strength, it took effort. My hold on the Brass Thief was slipping away.

Its rhyming swords raised to strike, it took its first step towards me.

IN THE UPSTAIRS chamber, Zael yelled in fear as Miserimus shook again and again.

‘Shut up!’ Carl bellowed, glancing around as objects vibrated and moved, or flew clean across the room. His work chair was turning in circles all by itself. His cogitator vomited sparks as the main screen shattered. Bulging shapes slid up and down under the wallpaper.

Holding Zael close to him, Carl stood in the centre of the darkened room, turning in frantic circles as the air churned and eddied around him. A flying data-slate hit him on the cheek. He ducked as a storage case spun across the room.

‘Begone! Begone!’ Carl yelled. His handgun – useless anyway – had already been yanked out of his hand by the maelstrom. He tried to form a hexagrammatic ward to fight the onslaught.

Invisible forces, laughing at the edge of hearing, grabbed Carl and slammed him hard against the wall, pinning him, spread-eagled, two metres up. Zael screamed out. The boy had fallen to his hands and knees and gazed up at Carl’s helpless body. Terrible pressures were crushing Carl into the wall.

‘Holy... God-Emperor...’ Carl shrieked in agony.

Zael buried his head in his hands and cowered on the floor. There was an odd, cracking sound that he was certain had to be bones breaking. A scatter of metal objects rained down on the carpet in front of him. Zael blinked.

They were Carl’s rings. The thirty or so rings that had adorned the fingers and thumb of Carl’s right hand. Every single one of them was twisted and snapped open, burst as if split from within.

‘C-Carl?’ Zael stammered. He looked up.

I WAS ALMOST insensible with pain. The cold hands of the psykers were upon me, guzzling at my strength, dragging me down to hell. My hold on the incunabula finally gave way.

Its first strike raked across the front of my chair. The second blow, with the other blade, scored the metal deeper. The third punched through, severing vital systems and shooting more pain into my besieged brain stem.

Something knocked the Brass Thief back away from me. I tried to focus through the swirling mayhem of light and wind and debris.

I saw Zeph. He was wounded in the left side from the detonating cannon. His clothes were tattered and bloody, and his augmetic left arm hung in

sparkling ruins. In his right hand, he clutched Kara's shivered sword.

He struck the Brass Thief again, drawing a prickle of sparks from its armour, and then blocked the rhyming swords as they cut at him. Stab and parry, one frantic sword against two.

He'd given me a moment's grace. I focused my will on the most immediate psyker and drove it off me with a barbed psy-lunge. The rotting ghost squealed and retreated a little. But at least two more were there, bleating and greasy.

I could feel some huge psychic force gathering above me, focused on the floor above. Carl's room. Something born of the darkest warp was boiling into fury up there. I heard screams. Inhuman screams.

IN THE BASEMENT vault, Trice and Culzean looked around at the lead holding tanks. All five were vibrating, like pots on a stove. Warning lights were flashing on all across the biometric consoles. At least three of the handlers had collapsed, blood pouring from their tear ducts and nostrils.

'What the hell is happening?' Trice yelled over the uproar.

There was a loud bang and one of the tanks cracked. Suspension fluid squirted out. The fluid was boiling.

'We've lost a psyker!' Revoke yelled, trying to harness the remaining units.

'Lost?'

'He's dead! Burned out!'

The lid blew off another tank, gushing scalding fluid over the lip. The fleshly body of the psyker inside had just exploded.

'Is this Ravenor?' Trice yelled.

'No,' said Culzean, his face quite pale. 'Listen.'

The three remaining psykers were screaming. Screaming out one word, over and over, a name.

Slyte! Slyte! Slyte! Slyte!

POWER SEEMED TO leave the psykers assaulting me for a moment. I threw them away from me, summoning my strength to re-engage the Brass Thief.

Zeph Mathuin ducked under one sweeping blow, then sliced the shivered sword upwards with a deft undercut.

It drove entirely through the incunabula's torso. Miasmal energy, like ichor, dribbled and ran from around the impaling blade.

Zeph tried to pull the sword out, but it was wedged fast.

The Brass Thief lunged.

Mathuin blinked.

The incunabula slowly slid its rhyming swords out of Mathuin's chest.

Zeph looked around at me, hopeless and lost, and fell dead on his face.

PART THREE

CITY OF MEN, CITY OF GODS



ONE

LATER, I CAME to understand that was the moment that fury seized me. Fury, grief, outrage and an all-consuming hatred I had never tasted before. I speared my telekinesis out along the devastated hallway and grasped the one parting gift Zeph Mathuin had left me.

The shivered sword stuck through the incunabula's torso.

I wasn't thinking any more. I was all but insensible with rage. My will was stronger and more ferocious than I had ever known it. It was as if I were drawing vast supplements of strength from the psychic powers loose in the house around me, or as if some vengeful force of balefire from the most alien recesses of the warp was invigorating my mind.

I wrenched the transfixed sword upwards and split the incunabula's chest armour through its brass sternum. The golden cage of its ribs broke open, releasing a gout of fetid, violet light from the daemon's inchoate core.

The Brass Thief twisted and writhed on the impaling sword, merely opening the chest wound wider. It made a mewling, whining sound.

I fired my chair's psy-cannon. Not just once, perhaps a dozen times, two dozen even. Every scalding bolt I aimed into the incunabula's ruptured chest cavity, and I kept firing until the relentless salvoes had the desired effect.

The brass and gold mechanism of the incunabula's form ripped apart in a blossom of fire, whizzing fragments in every direction. The blast was of such force that the shivered sword came spinning away to thump, tip down and quivering, into the floorboards beside my chair. The empty helm was driven upwards by the fireball and embedded itself in the ceiling by its crest.

The feral essence of the incunabula, the azoic daemon-spark, came shrieking out of the blast, free from the ancient device that had bound it for so long. It vanished, never, I imagine, to be found or enslaved again.

The broken brass remains clattered to the floor, like so much scrap metal, smouldering.

I sank back, exhausted, my powers ebbing. There was a noise behind me and I turned my chair quickly.

Wystan Frauka, bleeding from the side of the head and covered with plaster dust, was pulling himself out of the wreckage beside the staircase.

‘H-hello?’ he was mumbling. ‘Ravenor? Anyone?’

‘Wystan!’ I transponded at full volume. ‘Your limiter! Now!’

Foul psychic manifestations were still churning about the upper floors of the house, making torn, keening noises, and we were dreadfully exposed. Frauka fumbled with the small device at his throat and switched it off.

A decompressive boom shook the walls as his untouchable effect closed the area down. The bodiless forms of the invading psykers were banished, negated by the sudden deadness. I heard roof tiles dislodge and shatter as the forces were ejected from the building. Within seconds, a torrential rainstorm began to drench the ninth ward of Formal E.

Frauka gazed across the demolished ruin of the hallway, the shattered walls, the torn floorboards, the shot-up plaster. He saw the body lying near the entranceway.

‘Mathuin...’ he began, then went quiet, realising how pointless his question was.

I powered back up the staircase, or what was left of it. I prayed to the Golden Throne of Earth that I would find Thonius and Zael alive. I was puzzled and disturbed too. The psykers had come for me initially, and then at least half of them had concentrated their attacks on Carl’s room on the first floor, whereupon that loathsome psychic force had begun to gather up there. Why?

The door was closed. Smoke, or vapour of some sort, drifted up from under the door, and a thick coating of rime iced the door and the walls

either side, steaming as it began to thaw and slide to the floor.

The door handle rattled, stopped and then rattled again more urgently.

Something was in there, trying to get out.

KYS HOWLED AS Unwerth banked the flier hard to evade the swirling flock, but the birds turned as one, like a glittering shoal of pelagic fish, and spurted after them.

Unwerth pulled the nose around again, racing them along an up-stack canyon, missing oncoming air-traffic by the most horrifying of close margins. Heavier lifters, entering the canyon flow from above on guided descent, were forced to abort violently, and rose away from the stacks, sirens sounding. Unwerth yawed frantically from side to side, just avoiding a flier that came head-on, lights blazing, and banked them around the tail end of a massive cargo lifter by executing a virtual stall-turn.

The armoured flier's jetpods wailed to gather lift as Unwerth drove it on down a crossway. The Unkindness billowed in a sparkling ball as it changed direction to follow them. Swiftly, the sheen birds were gaining again, forming a mercurial ribbon of silver in the air that flowed in and out of the high alt traffic faster than Unwerth could weave the flier between, under and over the slower-moving vehicles in the skyway.

‘What in altercation are they?’ he yelled, fighting with the stick.

‘Birds!’ Kys shouted back.

‘But machines?’

‘Yes!’

‘Yet they fly like birds?’

‘Yes!’ she screamed. ‘Why? What does that matter?’

The front part of the beating swarm closed around them. They heard thousands of impacts as beaks and wings struck at the fuselage. Alarms sounded. Some of the sheen birds had gone into one or more of the engine intakes, mangled by the jet screws.

‘Hold on!’ Unwerth cried out. He slammed the nose down and hit the boosters.

The flier broke away from the Unkindness swarm and dropped like a missile into the depths of the stack-way burners lighting blue-hot. The fluttering stream of metal forms spiralled and dived after it.

They were dropping into the lower depths of the towering street, far too fast. Cross-bridges and pedestrian overwalks shot by, Unwerth going over some and under others. Kys could see the multi-lanes of surface traffic coming up to meet them, saw the headlights, the illuminated indicator boards, the jagged neon pointers detailing sink ramps and off-arterial sub-lanes.

‘Unwerth...’ she began.

Still at full boost, the shipmaster grimly kept the nose down.

‘Unwerth!’

The flier levelled and rocketed along five hundred metres of surface street, passing at roof level over the traffic queue so violently that the concussion of its jet-wash rocked transporters on their axles and blew out screens and door windows. Outraged citizens spilled out of their vehicles, only to duck back immediately, screaming in terror as the sheen storm rushed past a second later.

Unwerth sliced the flier between the roof of a cargo-10 and a massive over-road indicator board. Kys covered her eyes.

Unwerth pitched to the left suddenly, leaving the main surface arterial, and powered down over the traffic of a descender ramp. Within moments, they were chasing into the deep chasms of the undersink, into the inter-stack gulfs below the nominal surface level. Flier traffic in the undersink was seriously restricted: it was darker and tighter, and there were many, many more bridges and crosswalks. Roadside klaxons and hazard lamps began to hoot and flash. Indicator screens lit up red with notices to *Abort flightpath* or *Slow down*.

Unwerth did neither. He dropped lower, avoiding bridge spans that loomed suddenly out of the blackness, lower still, as if intent on plunging them into the very bottom-most sumps and pits of the hive-sinks.

Still the Unkindness beat down after them.

‘Birds, you said?’ Unwerth repeated, concentrating as hard as he could given the limited view ahead, his hands twisting and yanking the stick, the flier rocking and banking violently.

‘Yes,’ Kys said, holding on tightly. She looked across at him. ‘Why do you keep—’

She yelped as the flier hit something with huge, glancing force. Unwerth had misjudged an overhead duct and the collision had torn part of the upper control surface from the flier’s tail.

He fought to retain command, feeling the machine buck and try to spin out. Debris and crackling plumes of electrical discharge flurried back in the wounded craft’s slipstream. They were losing speed. The front of the flock was beginning to bang and clatter against the hull again.

A last turn, down yet another dim sub-level, right into the bilges now. Trailing a swirling, mobbing cloud of sheen birds, they gunned down a deep trench of rusted girderwork, moss-black rockcrete and dripping acid, their rushing lampbeams picking up the accumulated filth and trash that trickled down through the undersink. There was no more ‘down’ they could go.

And now, Kys realised, no more ‘on’ either. She saw the end of the trench ahead of them, a chainlink barrier, decaying hazard notices that were coming up too fast to read. The sump trench was a dead end.

Over the din of the sheen birds hammering and chipping at the hull, she cried out Unwerth’s name at the top of her voice.

If he heard her, he didn’t react in time.

The armoured flier hit the barrier fence, taking most of the chainlink along with it like a veil. It inverted, engines flaring, as it went over the sump wall.

And hit the dark, black water beyond in a huge cone of spray.

‘THEY’RE CLOSING STILL!’ Kara warned.

Plyton downshifted. ‘This is a Bergman Amity Veluxe,’ she said. ‘No one closes on a Bergman Amity Veluxe.’ The big black transporter surged

forward down the steep, high stack ramp, its engine making the most spectacular roar.

Behind it, the grey transporter dropped back a little, then began to push forward again.

At this hour, the arterials of Formal A were fairly quiet. Long stretches of rockcrete highway tunnel flicked by, lit by sodium lamps.

The man with the hellgun was still snapping off shots.

‘That said, find an exit,’ Kara said.

‘Hell with that,’ said Plyton.

‘Do it! Another straight section and they’ll shoot out our wheels, speed or no speed.’

As if to prove her point, a laser bolt hit the boot lid. The Bergman wavered. Lamps bright, the big grey transporter loomed behind them, jockeying to pull alongside, engine revving.

Kara threw herself over the passenger seat into the back, reached out through the shattered rear screen, and fired her handgun. Her first shots missed. In reply, two more energy rounds tore sideways through the roof.

‘Yeah, screw you,’ Kara said, and took aim again.

She pumped six shots through the wide front screen of the big grey transporter. It faltered slightly, then abruptly went into a savage uncontrolled spin.

‘Plyton!’

Plyton hit the throttle and boosted the Bergman forward just fast enough to avoid it being clipped from behind by the big, skidding transporter. The grey machine went across two lanes backwards and hit the central strip defenders – a barrier of sand drams and metal bars – with such force that it tore itself apart in a shower of glass and flying metal.

‘Now get us off this damn arterial,’ Kara said.

Plyton tore down the next exit into a gloomy sub-street. She dropped her speed, and made several random turns through quiet underlinks and cross-streets. Finally, they pulled into a loading dock and parked in the cover of

some rockcrete columns. Plyton killed the engine and the lights. They sat for a moment in the soft darkness, breathing hard. In the distance, they could hear vehicles roaring past on the arterial, and the sound of sirens. Not just emergency responders, security alarms too.

They got out. Plyton walked the length of the Bergman in dismay. ‘Look at it! Look at it! Uncle Vally will kill me when—’

She shut up suddenly. To Kara’s surprise, she started to weep.

‘Hey,’ said Kara.

Plyton shook her off and walked away into the shadows beyond the columns.

Kara let the girl be. She fished out her hand-vox and punched in a code. ‘Come on!’ she said. ‘Why aren’t you answering? Ravenor? Ravenor, where are you?’

The channel refused to pick up. Kara was just putting in Harlon’s code when she realised Plyton was staring at her.

‘What did you just say?’ the marshal asked.

‘What?’

‘That name. That *name!*’

‘RAVENOR?’ FRAUKA HAD come to join me. He’d drawn his own compact weapon, for all the good that would do on a night like this. The door handle continued to rattle.

‘You want me to...?’ he pointed to his limiter.

‘Only if we really have to. Wait.’

Outside the rain sluiced down. I was sure it wouldn’t be long now before more conventional agents of our enemy arrived.

The rattling finally ceased. There was a click and the door swung open.

Panting, Carl stood in the doorway, leaning for support against the splintered jamb. His clothes were torn, and serious bruises covered the bare flesh of his throat and the side of his face. Blood trickled from his left nostril.

‘Oh Throne,’ he gasped. ‘It’s you.’

‘Carl?’

‘I thought they were going to kill us. Tear us apart.’

‘Are you all right?’

‘I’ll live. I probably won’t ever sleep soundly again, but I’ll live.’

‘Where’s Zael?’

He gestured into the room behind him and I sped past.

Carl’s room was utterly destroyed. Everything in it had been torn apart, every machine smashed, every stick of furniture reduced to slivers of wood and tufts of fabric. It looked as if a hurricane had passed through. Then again, the rest of the house was hardly what the landlord would describe as ‘in good order’.

Zael was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room. The carpet around him was singed. He was staring into space, his eyes glazed.

‘Zael?’

The boy didn’t reply.

‘What happened?’ Frauka asked.

‘Psykers,’ said Carl, wiping his nose. ‘Two or three of them, I think. I don’t know. The place just turned upside down. These... invisible hands, they pinned me to the wall,’ Carl fingered the dark bruises around his throat. ‘Crushing me, and...’

‘Carl? What?’

Thonius pointed a shaking hand at Zael. ‘Zael... the boy... he just...’

‘What?’

‘Well, I don’t know what he did, exactly. But he destroyed them. I heard the psykers shrieking in the air. Zael was laughing, like a little kid playing with toys. I think I must have passed out then, because when I came round, everything was quiet and he was just sitting there. Like that. Just zoned out.’

‘All right,’ I said. ‘Our priority right now is to get out of here. Fast. I’ll deal with Zael as soon as we’re secure.’

‘Look,’ said Carl, ‘there’s one other thing. I know we’re all jumpy about this, and things have been said about Zael, and I sure as hell don’t want to make trouble where there is none. But I heard a name. I don’t know if it was in my mind after I passed out, if I dreamed it, or what. But I’d swear the psykers were howling out a name. They were... they were saying “Slyte”.’

I saw Frauka look at me. It was one of the few times I knew exactly what he was thinking even though he was an untouchable.

‘We will deal with this later,’ I said. ‘I’ll watch over the boy. Frauka, see what if anything you can salvage from the wreckage. Ten minutes, no longer. Carl, go and get the cargo-8 from the garages and bring it round the front.’

‘Can’t Zeph do that?’ Carl said.

‘Mathuin’s dead,’ Frauka told him.

IT WAS GETTING so cold out on the tower approaches in Formal A that Harlon Nayl was almost tempted to find one of the late night oven-barrows and buy a cup of the perniciously awful liquid they claimed was soup.

He moved from foot to foot, rubbing his hands together, praying for a call from someone, anyone. It had been almost an hour.

Finally, when he could stand it no longer, he coded his vox and called the house.

Nothing. *Channel dead*, the display read. With mounting alarm, he tried Thonius’s channel, then Mathuin’s, then even Frauka’s. Each one flashed up as dead.

He started to run back towards the rail transit. By the time he’d reached the stone steps into the station, he was sprinting.



TWO

A FRAGRANT SCENT of sweet corruption mixed with acrid fumes drifted through the lower levels of the governor's palace, concentrated in the floors given over to the secretists' enclave. Someone had at last managed to cancel the blaring alarms, and crash teams had moved in, tending to the injured, putting out machine fires, and beginning repair and recovery work.

The chief provost, shaking with what Revoke presumed to be barely-contained rage, had withdrawn to the safety of an armoured parlour in the cap levels of the tower, taking Culzean and Culzean's female bodyguard with him. Revoke wanted to stay to supervise the recovery, but he knew Trice probably needed protection at this ill-fortuned time, so he left Molay and Boneheart in charge and accompanied his master.

The parlour was part of Trice's personal suite of apartments. Refined, luxurious, it was softly lit by recessed lumin strips and standard lamps, and lined with library shelves of books and slates built into the wood panelling.

Culzean had taken a seat. As ever, he looked remarkably unruffled, and happily accepted a drink one of the servitors offered him. His guard, Slade, lingered nearby, tense and edgy.

Trice paced for a while.

'Ravenor,' he said, coming to a halt.

For the third time since the mayhem in the basement vaults, Culzean shook his head and said 'No, not Ravenor. Chief provost, that was something more.'

'Your daemon.'

‘Not mine,’ Culzean said, sipping and sitting back. ‘Yes, I was previously employed to facilitate the manifestation of Slyte, but I work for you now.’

Trice laughed mirthlessly. ‘Get me a drink,’ he snapped at one of the attending servitors. ‘How convenient, Master Culzean,’ he said, ‘that the goal of your previous job was so admirably accomplished tonight. A suspicious man might be tempted to think this was all part of your scheme.’

‘Are you a suspicious man, chief provost?’ Culzean asked.

‘Explain to me how I might otherwise read this... disaster,’ Trice snapped.

Culzean put his glass down and leaned forward, gently smoothing his hands together. His voice was so well-pitched, so gently modulated. ‘First of all, what happened tonight was a confluence. A combination of events. To clarify: the Divine Fraternity, through catoptric means of prediction, prophesied that a potent force, known as Slyte, would be brought into being here before the end of the year. Its manifestation would directly attach to the Inquisitor Ravenor, or one of his party of specialists. They employed me to make this possibility a certainty. Because you, and your Ministry, and your grand work, is entirely opposed to Ravenor, that made you key obstacles to the process. Which, of course, is why we got off to a... bad start.’

Culzean smiled. Trice did not.

‘Anyway, with my help, you moved against Ravenor. This could have finished the Fraternity’s schemes – kill Ravenor and, of course, you doom the prophecy – or, as seems to have happened, it provided the catalyst for the event. I did remark, as I remember, that the psykers weren’t such a great idea.’

Trice glared at him. ‘Are you suggesting that I—’

‘I’m suggesting,’ Culzean put in smoothly, ‘that you stop worrying. If Slyte’s been born, then Slyte’s been born. The Fraternity will be delighted. In time, Slyte may become a problem, but right now, he’s just a warp-thing, spat out into our material world. Do you have any idea how many

cacodaemons and sprites are conjured up by lunatic cults in the undersinks of a hive this big every year? By the time Slyte grows to be any kind of threat, your project here in the city will have advanced to such a level that he will be a threat you can extinguish with the merest... word. Or have I overestimated the scope of your designs?’

‘You haven’t,’ Trice said.

‘Put a smile on your face,’ said Culzean. ‘Press forward. Use me, because I can help you. And think of this. Slyte has done one thing to help you. If he has manifested, Ravenor is dead. Obliterated. The daemon’s done your wetwork for you.’

Trice nodded. ‘If what you’re saying is true, Master Culzean, I’ll be delighted, despite the damage and losses we’ve incurred tonight. And I will use you, as you say. You boasted of many weapons in your arsenal as a facilitator. I want you to guard us against Slyte. Revoke will give you any resources you need.’

Culzean was about to reply when the main hatch to the parlour slid open. A shocked hush fell as a man walked in. Culzean stared at the figure with contained surprise and rose to his feet. Tall, slender, dressed in long black robes, the newcomer was unmistakably the Lord Governor Subsector, Oska Ludolf Barazan.

Barazan walked directly over to Jader Trice and slapped him around the face so hard it knocked Trice to the deck.

‘You useless wretch!’ Barazan spat. ‘Four psykers destroyed! Four of them! And the other one so badly mauled she’ll have to be put down! The alarms woke me! Did you think I wouldn’t find out?’

‘My lord!’ Trice cried out, seemingly less concerned that he had been knocked down than he was that Culzean had witnessed it. ‘We have visitors! Visitors! Not while you wear your public guise!’

Barazan kicked Trice in the ribs and made him double up in pain. Calmly, the lord governor subsector turned and smiled at Culzean. Culzean had seen that face so many times on newscasts and pict-channels.

‘Master Culzean, we haven’t met,’ Barazan said, holding out his gloved hand.

Culzean bowed and kissed the ring of office. ‘An honour, my lord.’

‘Get up!’ Barazan jeered at Trice. Revoke stepped forward and helped the chief provost onto a sofa. Barazan turned back to Culzean, his smile broad. ‘Jader is worried that my little outburst might have unsettled you.’

Culzean shrugged. ‘It’s not every day, sir, that a man witnesses a lord subsector corporally punishing his chief provost. But no, I’m not unsettled.’

‘Oh, and why is that?’

Culzean thought about his next words very carefully. If he had read this wrong, Revoke would probably slay him in a second.

‘Because, sir, no scheme of this scale could have been set up without the full knowledge of the lord governor.’

‘I like him,’ Barazan said, glancing at Trice and Revoke. ‘He’s very sharp, this one, very perceptive.’

Barazan turned around, regarding the chief provost. ‘I’ve been observing your conversation, for days now, in fact. What is the point of having secretists if they keep secrets from you?’ Barazan winked at one of the servitors. It shimmered, and became Monicker.

‘Thank you, my dear. As ever, you serve me well. Jader, I know about Ravenor, damn his name, and I know about your efforts to destroy him without me knowing about it. How thoughtful, Jader, to spare my nerves the worry that bastard was active here on Eustis.’

‘Lord, I—’

‘Shut up, Jader. Is Ravenor dead?’ he asked Culzean.

‘I think it’s very likely, lord.’

‘And this Slyte? The daemon offers no challenge to us?’

‘It depends what you intend to do, sir,’ Culzean replied. ‘I’ve not been told in any detail, naturally. The chief provost is too wise to leak that sort

of data to an untrusted minion. But I can imagine. I have ideas. If I'm right, Slyte, whatever its power, is just a bug to be crushed along the way.'

'Good.'

'So long as...'

'So long as what?' Barazan asked.

'You do whatever you're going to do quickly. Chaos has a habit of escalating. It's hard to read, harder to predict. Slyte's nothing now, but soon... Well, I recommend you put your plan together and act right now.'

'Exactly what I was thinking,' said Barazan. 'I told you I liked this man. Wise counsel.'

'My lord!' Trice said, getting up, urgent. 'The project is not finished! Another month, perhaps six weeks, and we'll have completed the lexicon. I've not laboured this long and this hard to prepare the way only to rush prematurely through the final—'

'Jader, dear Jader. I've not laboured this long and this hard either. I refuse to wait any longer for sublimation. The pain is so hard, every day. Another month, six weeks? What of it? We have the Encompass now, the colure, the radius, we have the components in place. We know the true centre, dammit! The looms have spun us out a lexicon that is as complete as we need. Once we transcend, all the minor details and omissions will be revealed and finished. I will not wait around for another impediment to trip us. This Slyte, for example, or Ravenor – if, curse the emptiness, he still lives. We will go now.'

'I voice my objections again, lord,' Trice said.

'Now! No more foot-dragging. Tomorrow night, we will undertake the first Enunciation. Get to work. Instigate the masses. Do what you assured me you could do.'

Trice looked aside. 'As you decide, sir.'

'Orfeo,' said the lord governor. 'Why don't you follow me up to the residence? I think it's time you and I had a conversation.'

'Yes, lord. I look forward to it.'

‘At your leisure. My guards will show you the way.’

Barazan left. Trice stared at Culzean for a second. Culzean simply sat down again and reached for his drink.

Trice stormed out of the parlour, Revoke behind him.

Leyla Slade waited until Monicker had left the room too. Then she crouched down behind the sofa Culzean was sitting on.

‘I really can’t tell,’ she whispered. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Well, Ley,’ Culzean said. ‘The bluffing’s stepped up a notch or two. But I think we’re safe.’

‘They bought your story about Slyte?’

‘Yes, they did.’

‘But Slyte...?’

‘Oh, it’s more massive and dangerous than they can possibly imagine. But if I let them know that, they’d panic. Then we’ll never get what we want. I need to control this. See it through to the end. That way, I’ll get the pay-off. And believe me, Ley, the pay-off this time is something special.’

‘Really?’ she frowned. ‘This Enuncia thing?’

‘More than you can possibly imagine, Leyla. I’ll make you a goddess.’

‘I like the sound of that.’

‘Are the weapons ready?’

She nodded. ‘I’ve got six inscribed hooktors in my clip, the special ones you spent all those months preparing.’

‘Good.’

‘And the Telluric Stone. That’s in a case in my pocket. There wasn’t any time to prepare more than that.’

Culzean rose to his feet. ‘They should do, Ley. I have a few tricks myself. Let’s go take the lord governor up on his invitation.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Because he’ll tell us all about Enuncia. And his amasec has got to be a great deal better than the shit they serve down here.’

THE SOUTHERN STACK-RISES of Petropolis had grown so fast that they had extended out across the river bay, the lower levels of the undersink actually built up on silt-sunk piles above the water, creating a district known as the over-float. It was a dark and stinking catacomb down there, forty-eight stack levels down from surface level. The water reaches were so dark, so ancient that eyeless albino vermin had evolved in the gloom. Effluvia pumped out from blackened spigots. Luminescent moulds sprouted from the stone piers and stanchions. A ripe floodtide of detritus sobbed in and out under the sink-sumps.

Kys surfaced, gagging, and went under again. She came up, grabbed a frantic breath, then treadmilled around in the black soup, searching for Unwerth.

Once they'd hit the water, she'd slammed the ejector charges.

'Sholto? Shol—ulp! Gah! Sholto?'

Bubbles dribbled up from the sinking flier.

Kys floundered around, her hair plastered to her face by the stinking, weed-filled water. She glanced about. There was no sign of any sheen birds. The place was dark and silent except for the slopping of the water.

And her voice.

'Sholto?'

'Mamzel?' Unwerth spat the word rather than said it as he surfaced in a flurry of bubbles.

'Throne! I thought you'd drowned!'

'I'm obligated to be about to,' gurgled Unwerth. 'Can't swim—'

He went under.

Kys forked her arms and splashed over to him, dragging him up, her flesh tingling from the dilute acid in the water. She towed him over to the nearest mossy brick bulwark and heaved him up onto the platform.

'Unwerth? Unwerth?' Kys pumped his chest and blew air into his mouth.

He remained still.

‘Unwerth!’ She pounded harder and planted her lips around his, breathing out hard.

He started, gagging, and she rolled him onto his side. A quantity of river filth drained out of his mouth.

Coughing, spluttering, he looked up at her.

‘Birds?’ he said.

‘Yes, bloody birds!’

‘As I concupise it, most birds can’t swim,’ he said.

Patience Kys realised what he had done and began to laugh. Her laughter echoed out across the dark caves of the overfloat.



THREE

‘HOW’S EVERYONE DOING?’ Belknap asked.

‘Do you have any rubbing alcohol?’ Frauka asked him.

‘Why? For the scratch on your head?’ Belknap said.

‘No. Just thirsty,’ Frauka smirked, lighting a lho-stick.

Belknap had concealed us in a lockup over the street from the den he used as a surgery. It was a poor place, but it was out of the way. Even at this late hour, the noise from the dirty sink-streets outside was loud and raucous. Drunken tavern crowds, what sounded like a gang fight in a nearby alley, a cluster of black market stalls around the oil can fires of the nearest walkthrough.

Carl limped over to me. He’d bought a hand-vox from one of the black market vendors on the street, and with it he had contacted Kara and Nayl.

‘They’re both on their way.’

‘What did you tell them?’

‘Only where to come,’ he said. ‘Neither have heard from Patience.’

‘Get some rest.’

I was waiting near Zael. Belknap had laid the boy down on a ratty cot. Zael’s eyes were still open. He had made no sound or motion since I’d found him in Carl’s room.

‘Physically he’s fine. A few scratches. But he’s in a fugue state,’ the medicae said. ‘Brought on by severe shock or trauma.’

‘Very likely,’ I said. ‘Tonight has been... difficult.’

‘The best thing is to leave him for a while,’ Belknap advised.

I agreed, but in my heart I knew the good doctor was wrong. The best thing, the safest thing, would be to execute Zael Efferneti right now, while

he was comatose. There was a high likelihood that Zael had manifested Slyte during the psyker attack, that the warp latency in his mind had been provoked into action by the assault. I'd seen that before: individuals suddenly displaying previously unknown psy powers under extremis. Caught in the teeth of three or four murderous psykers, Zael's fragile sanity had snapped and something else had come out.

And what a thing. Even newborn, it had destroyed perhaps three of the psykers. It had also, I was quite sure, playfully linked its power to mine and assisted with the destruction of the Brass Thief. That was where my almost mindless rage had come from.

The Divine Fraternity had spent years preparing the way for the daemon Slyte. My master, Eisenhorn, had trekked across the sector to warn me. Slyte was an abominable threat to Imperial security, and I, or one of those about me, would bring it forth.

I knew I should just kill Zael right then, before he woke.

But I had good reasons not to. Not just yet. The first, the most human, was that I did not relish murdering a boy in his sleep, especially as I had only circumstantial evidence he was corrupted. There was still a slender chance he was innocent.

Secondly, I could detect no trace of the warp upon him, except for the foggy latency of his farseeing gift. And that was the third reason. Zael's unformed talent was so rare and so passive. A mirror seer, a reactor. That was precisely why I hadn't executed him or consigned him to the black ships the day I discovered him. His nascent talent was a precious thing, one that could benefit the Imperium of Mankind so very much. And it was not an *active* talent. It seemed so unlikely that a passive gift could be the womb, the cradle of a manifesting daemon. Such things inevitably came into our world through minds twisted by madness, greed, psychosis, or potent, active psyker power.

Like mine, for instance.

With his name, and his odd, disarming manner, and his sometimes troubling gift, Zael Efferneti was so obviously the threat. Too obviously.

I would stay my hand until I had the opportunity to study him further. If I got that chance. I owed Zael the benefit of the doubt.

And, of course, there was the fourth reason. If Slyte was lurking beneath the surface of the comatose boy's mind, if Slyte was anything like as powerful as I had been led to believe, putting a weapon to Zael's head would be a very, very bad idea. It might be the hasty action that caused the daemon to manifest permanently.

For now, Zael slept. And if Slyte was sleeping inside him, then at least Slyte was sleeping.

'Sir?' It was Carl. 'Some good news at last. Nayl just called to say he's been contacted by Patience. She was calling from a public vox in Formal L.'

'Formal L?'

'There's a story to it, apparently. She's fine, though her powers are temporarily inhibited, which is why you couldn't find her. She's on her way here. Apparency, she's got some important information for us.'

'ENUNCIA,' PATIENCE KYS said.

There was a moment's pause.

'Are you sure?' I asked.

'I followed that bastard Molotch all the way to Zenta Malhyde when he was looking for it. He never told me much or shared any of what he had learned, but I know the taste of it, the smell of it. Trice's Ministry is engaged in the production of a working grammar for Enuncia.'

It was a staggering thought, but it made sense of many things.

'I believe they're processing, one piece at a time,' said Kys, 'one morpheme at a time. They're not deciphering it from some archaeological cache or ancient text. They're weaving it from our own, known language bases.'

'You mean randomly?' Thonius asked, doubtful.

Kys nodded. 'Yes. They're taking raw language, raw symbols, alphabet characters, scripts, syllables, numerals, number bases, etymons and word

roots, syntax and grammar structures, and they're breaking it right down to the smallest units, to phonemes and morphemes, which they are then systematically recombining at random into every conceivable permutation.'

Nayl sniffed. 'Recombining?'

'In any way they can,' Kys said. 'Cipherring, deciphering, transliterating, substituting. They're forcing the raw material through patterns of anagram, acrostic, pangram, hell, rhymes for all I know. At the most basic level, they are taking every morpheme and trying it against every other possible combination of morphemes. And every now and then, they get a strike. They get a piece of Enuncia that they can identify and secure into... well, I suppose they are producing some kind of primer program.'

'And like completing a puzzle,' I said, 'the more pieces they get, the more help it gives them finding the rest.'

'Wait, wait!' said Carl, getting to his feet. 'I understand what you're saying, but you're talking about a massive undertaking. Truly massive! Just handling that amount of data and processing it randomly, that would take thousands of years!'

'But it could be done,' I said. 'Remember the old joke about giving an infinite number of simians an infinite number of script engines and eventually, probability demands, they would produce the complete works of Vayten?'

Carl looked at me. 'Yeah, and the bit of that to really remember is that it's a joke.'

'Maybe not an infinite number of simians,' Kys said. 'But how about the entire Administratum of a subsector capital? Millions of scribes using, as far as we know at least five million cogitators brought in from the Mergent Worlds? Sixty main system data looms?'

'Sixty...' Carl breathed.

'It suddenly sounds more plausible, doesn't it?' Kys smiled. 'And for the most part, those infinite simians have no idea what they're doing. They're just drones, processing what comes in front of them. Oh, every now and

then one has a fit because he's accidentally found or created a piece of Enuncia, but the Ministry have supervisors on hand to cover that.'

'Well, I suppose that would explain why the data you fed me made no discernible sense,' said Carl, 'and then fried my engines. They must be using the imported cogitators because they're polluted. Perhaps more resistant to the material they are handling.'

'Or more sensitive,' I said.

'I have, as it might be, a query.'

We all looked round. Since arriving with Kys, Unwerth had sat in the corner of the chamber, with Belknap cleaning and dressing his miserable injuries. I regretted, yet again, that another individual had suffered because of their association with me.

'What, beggaring the question,' he said, 'is this Enuncia? And please, sir, do not obstinate me to be excluding my nasal from your business for the good of my health.'

I winced at that and moved over to face him. 'Enuncia is the name ancient scholars gave to a lost, pre-human language, Master Unwerth. Its origins and use may have associations to the warp itself, or to antique super-races that may once have existed in our cosmos. Tiny scraps of it have occasionally been discovered. We don't know how it was created originally, or even used. It's possibly the source of the arts we now understand as "magic". Simply put, the language was a tool, an instrument. By the power of words alone, the fabric of reality could be changed, transformed, Controlled, manipulated, reshaped. It was a fundamental device of creation.'

'Or destruction,' Kys added.

'That sound you made,' Unwerth said to Kys. 'In the cell. The one by which manner you discomforted our jailer. That was Enuncia?'

'A tiny part of it, probably a meaningless unit,' Kys replied. 'But yes.'

Unwerth thought about that. 'I have turned words around in my lifetime, but I have never by wit of them enforced a man to be ill upon the floor.'

'You say that...' Nayl grinned.

‘How did you know it?’ Unwerth asked.

‘We’ve encountered it before,’ I said. ‘Some years ago, we were engaged in the pursuit of a heretic called Molotch. His ambition was to recover enough elements of Enuncia from xenoarcheological sites in the out-worlds to master a rudimentary command of it. Patience actually infiltrated his party for some time, enabling us to track them down and stop them. Molotch was killed.’

‘Molotch was Cognitae,’ said Patience. ‘Should we be concerned that several figures in this drama have the same connection?’

‘We should bear it in mind,’ I said. ‘Either Cognitae agents are making a second attempt to break Enuncia, or this is a direct sequel to Molotch’s work.’

‘And what will Trice or his occult masters do with Enuncia when they have it?’ asked Nayl.

‘I would suppose,’ I said, ‘anything they like.’

A buzzer sounded. The outer door. ‘I’ll get it,’ Frauka said, rising and stubbing out another lho-stick. ‘Garters and firm, white buttocks.’

Everyone looked at him, even Belknap.

‘Sorry, just reading aloud,’ said Frauka, putting his data-slate down. ‘My, the power of words.’

IT WAS KARA, the final member of my team to congregate in the Formal J undersink. She was accompanied by a dark-haired woman with an attractive face that at present looked drawn and tired.

‘This is Maud Plyton,’ said Kara. ‘Junior marshal, Magistratum.’

‘Department of Special Crime,’ Plyton said. She was staring at my armoured chair dubiously.

‘Ravenor,’ I replied. The forward shell of my chair displayed my rosette.

‘Maud may be the only member of her department left alive,’ Kara said. ‘Special Crime made a chance discovery a few days ago, a discovery the Ministry has been at such pains to cover up that it has silenced many

members of the department. Attempts have been made on Maud's life. Her invalid uncle was murdered in one of them.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said. 'Can you tell me what this discovery was?'

'Yes,' Plyton replied. She had a sheaf of documents under her arm. 'It will take a little time to explain. The discovery was made in the old sacristy adjoining the grand templum—'

'...in Formal A,' I finished. 'Could it be, by any chance, that's also where the two of you met?'

Kara shot me a wicked grin. 'Zael, huh? How about that?'

'Kara, Marshal Plyton, I'm keen to hear everything you have to tell me. But first, Kara, I need to talk to you about Zael. And Zeph.'



FOUR

FOR JADER TRICE, the day of days began early. He had trained his body and mind over the years to require only three or four hours' sleep, but on this auspicious night, he snatched just one frail hour. His hand servants woke him at the third bell, with night still sprawled across the city and dawn another four hours away.

The servants lit the lamps in his apartments, bathed and dressed him, and brought him his breakfast. As per the instructions he had written himself, the bathing water was without tincture or oils, and the clothes were a simple attire of dark grey. He put on no rings or signets nor marks of wealth or status. The only concession he made was his fine pocket chron. In due course, that would have to be set aside too, but for now he needed to keep a careful record of the passage of time.

His breakfast eschewed the caffeine, freshly baked sugarbread and conserve he usually favoured. The servants presented him with ripe fruit, ebongrass tea and some wheat biscuits.

As he ate, half-heartedly, sitting at his bureau and reading the first of the day's despatches brought to him by his seneschal, he realised how utterly despondent he felt. This was a day, a moment, he had been dreaming of for over twenty-five years. He'd been planning for it for the last fifteen, and actively working towards it for the whole of the previous decade.

Trice prided himself on a precision of labour, on patience, on attention to detail. He hadn't risen to the rank of chief provost without those skills and, fate knew, they were essential for the matter in hand. The first Enunciation. The commencing Rite of Transcendence.

He had planned every last detail with meticulous care, even down to the weave pattern to be used in the ritual clothing. This wasn't a matter of

carefully arranging a private ceremony, like the cabals and séances he and his fellow Cognitae initiates had conducted in their scholam days. This was on a scale unimaginable back then. This was orchestration.

And now, after all the fastidious preparation, all that planning, all that discipline, he found he was being rushed into it. The Diadochoi's unseemly haste! This was wrong. With the lexicon so close to completion, why were they risking failure by advancing the moment of the first Enunciation so recklessly?

Trice toyed with the last piece of fruit and considered getting to his feet, climbing up to the Residence, and demanding that the Diadochoi reconsider. Surely he could be made to listen to reason?

No. Of course not. One did not reason with a man like the Diadochoi. Once the master's mind was decided, nothing would change it. And now, that bastard facilitator, the honey-tongued Culzean, had the Diadochoi's ear, egging him on. Culzean was an expeditor. By the very nature of his profession, he made things happen in the quickest, most direct way. All very clever, Orfeo Culzean, but an Enunciation could not be brought to fruition by following the path of least resistance. It should not be rushed or forced, it should not be *expedited*. It was far too pure and intricate an event for that.

Forty-five minutes after Trice had been woken, a colonel of the Eustis Majoris Planetary Defence Force arrived at the governor's palace in a military pinnace, escorted by four lifter gunships. He had come directly from PDF watch command, Station Lupercal, a star fort in geosynchronous orbit above Petropolis. He was attired in full dress uniform and carried a locked despatch box that was chained to his wrist. The secretists accompanied him to the chief provost's chambers.

Revoke personally led the man in and stood back while the colonel presented himself.

'At your bidding, my lord,' the officer announced, putting the box on the floor, snapping to attention and making the salute of the aquila.

‘The Emperor protects,’ Trice replied, rising to his feet. ‘Good morning. You have the weather station reports and the global attitude?’

‘Yes, lord. Reports as of midnight, equatorial, with a thirty-six hour plot as commanded. Attitude was calculated by the officers of the watch at Lupercal, Fraylees, Antropy and Kuskin stations, triangulated via astropath through Navy flotillas at Caxton, Lenk, Tancred and Gudrun. The attitude was further confirmed by Adeptus Astrocartographus, at the Deep Relay Discerner at Kobish, the Massive Circular Array at Lockmore Heights and the Kristophe Cartenne Observatory.’

‘Margin of error?’

‘Decimal zero zero zero two, sir.’

Trice nodded. The colonel picked up the box, unlocked it with a code and handed the chief provost a small yellow data-tile.

‘Thank you, colonel.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ the colonel saluted, and left the chamber.

Trice sat back down and slid the tile into the cogitator beside his desk.

The screen lit and data scrolled down it. It was a projection of Eustis Majoris’s precise sidereal alignment: the planet’s position in space described as exactly as Imperial science could establish. Trice tracked forward and watched the screen resolve the relative plot developing through the course of thirty-six hours. Then he overlaid the weather mapping and watched it again.

‘Damn,’ he whispered at last.

‘A problem?’ Revoke asked.

‘No,’ said Trice. ‘And that’s the problem. Positional variance is excellent and the weather suits us too. We’ve actually chanced upon a tertiary level alignment. A good one, as it happens. Phasic spread is almost secondary in quality. Gods! A week ago, this data would have suggested an abysmal alignment tonight. But now we factor in the true centre, it’s...’

‘Perfect?’ Revoke suggested.

‘*Perfect* happens once every sixteen thousand years, Toros. *Extremely fine*, once every five hundred. We knew we wouldn’t hold out for that degree of alignment. By the old calculations, we estimated we’d get a *good* around Midwinter. Now, it appears, we have an *acceptable* tonight. At the eighth hour plus six precisely. What are those odds, do you suppose? It’s almost as if he knew.’

‘Maybe he did?’ Revoke said.

‘Maybe he did...’ Trice echoed.

‘I don’t understand your displeasure,’ Revoke said. ‘If tonight is propitious, why are you so disappointed?’

Trice ejected the yellow tile from his engine and held it up. ‘I was hoping the auguries would be poor, my friend. If they were poor, I might have used them to convince the Diadochoi to delay the ritual. He understands facts, and he doesn’t argue with them. It was my last hope. But the predictions are good. So I can’t.’

‘You really hoped for a postponement?’

Trice nodded. ‘I did, Toros. I really did. This is too fast, too rushed—’

‘Everything is in place, sir.’

‘Of course it is! I made it so! But I designed this moment. So long, so hard... and now I find myself rushed into it at a day’s notice.’

Revoke looked at the floor. ‘I’m sorry to hear that, sir. I hate to see your disappointment. Maybe I could speak with the Diadochoi on your behalf?’

Trice smiled. ‘There’s no point, Toros. The first of my sealed orders have already been opened, haven’t they?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘The first functions already underway?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then the rock is already rolling, and woe betide any who stand in its way. Even a chief provost. Let me say now, before it’s too late, I am heartened by your staunch loyalty. I may not get a chance to tell you that later.’

Revoke looked awkward. 'Thank you, sir,' he said.

Trice rose and tossed the yellow tile to Revoke. Revoke caught it neatly.

'The geometricians will be needing that. Have the data routed to all elements. Eighth hour plus six. As of this moment, the Ministry stands at condition delta. If we're going to be forced to do this, we'd better do it well.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Begin the masses.'

'They've already started,' Toros Revoke replied.

OUT ACROSS THE hive, temple bells were pealing in the pre-dawn dark, calling the faithful to prayer. Most temples in the hive half-filled with the usual bleary attendees, coming to worship out of habit and duty. But, that morning, nine hundred and ninety-nine city temples were packed with capacity congregations of citizens who had been up, dressed and ready hours before the dawn service.

For three and a half years, the secretists had been running private masses in these nine hundred and ninety-nine churches. Ostensibly Imperial in nature, these masses were a skilful and insidious process of conditioning. A variety of methods had been employed, not the least being the fact that the temple bells had been subtly retimed so that their peals created a subliminal call that lured the congregation in. In the first few months, the secretists had vetted the congregations, and quietly removed any worshippers who registered as unreceptive or unsuitable on their biometric scans. Then the clerics in charge of the masses had begun to drop mesmeric subtexts into the services, using ciphered forms of Enuncia, conditioning the congregations into absolute cooperation. Not a single man or woman amongst the worshippers even suspected that the masses they were participating in were anything but the Imperial creed. On that morning, that day of days, no one in those nine hundred and ninety-nine churches so much as blinked when the clerics slid open their triptychs and displayed, not the God-Emperor and his saints, but stark, almost

psychedelic symbols of Enuncia. Nor did they hear the words they were actually saying.

And these were not low-hab, ill-educated people so preyed upon. Many of the private masses were held in temples that served highborn populations. Nobles, academics, lawyers, educators, merchants, magistrates, civil servants of note. One particular church, St Pilomel Highstack, was the one preferred by the Officio Inquisitorus Planetia, and thus over a hundred interrogators, explicators and other ordo servants had been inducted. This had delighted the Diadochoi particularly – it had been a recurring question as to how the Inquisition could be contained and muzzled during the preparations for Enunciation, and simply by dint of geography, because of the temple they used, the Inquisition had not only muzzled itself, but had become active participants in the event. A *cosmic irony*, the Diadochoi had called it.

The location of the nine hundred and ninety-nine chosen temples was no accident. If lines were drawn through them on a chart of Petropolis, they defined precise, invisible axes across the city plan. To a casual eye, a plan of the hive looked like a shapeless, unstructured thing, a complex blotch of intersecting stack-streets and overlapping wards. But, when such lines were drawn, as they had been drawn on the hyper-accurate chart on the floor of the Encompass Room, they revealed a peculiar, almost beautiful symmetry to the city layout.

They revealed its planned and exquisitely formulated perfection. They revealed its design, not as a place of habitation and commerce, but as a vast and complex mechanism.

TRICE RECHECKED THE time on his pocket chron. Sunrise was now just six minutes away. In the previous thirty-five minutes, he had conducted a series of final briefings with some of the key operation groups. First, with the eight-man team of secretists who would fly out just after dawn and travel to Carbonopolis, the second city of Eustis Majoris, a sprawling, balkanised hive near the southern pole. There, through the course of the day, they would plant and detonate a series of devices and leak

disinformation suggesting a systematic program of cult attacks. By nightfall, there would be a state of global emergency, with Carbonopolis the focus of attention for the PDF, the planet's Imperial Guard garrisons and the Navy. Misdirection on the grandest scale.

Then Trice had briefed the chiefs of the Ministry's technical departments, whose task later in the day would be to hijack, by means of cogitation, digitation and vox, all of Petropolis's newscasts, air-networks, audio caster systems and sundry pict-channels. Some would be shut down, others would be set to broadcast specially prepared materials that would be given to the chiefs nearer to time.

Trice had then moved to his next meeting, reading as he walked the latest clutch of despatches that Revoke handed to him. For a moment, he felt exhilarated to see the absolutely sublime way his long-prepared plan was being executed. Every last detail slotting into place, just as he had designed it.

Then his burning despondency had returned. *The haste. The foolish haste!*

The third briefing had been with the eighty-strong team of secretists, under Tolemi's command, who would raid the central hive premises of the Astropathicus during the late afternoon. They would pose as officers of the Inquisition, and the cover story would be a suspected Chaos taint, connected to the incident at the diplomatic palace. Heavy duty inhibitor units would be set up at each astropath centre, and by late evening, all legal telepathic activity in and around the hive would be blunted.

Now it was six minutes to sunrise. At a nod from Trice, Revoke opened the doors into the climate-controlled vault of the cipherists. The perfecti, a dozen men in long green robes, were ready and waiting for him. They bowed and made their formal greeting.

'Are they prepared?' Trice asked.

The senior perfectus, a wizened man called Mattaray, beckoned the chief provost over and showed him the long rows of sealed desks in which the anonymic wafers had been laid out, each one covered by an opaquing field. There were nine hundred and ninety-nine of them. At the end of the

afternoon, they would each be hermetically sealed into inert envelopes, placed in carrying coffers, and sent out by secretist despatchers to the nine hundred and ninety-nine axial churches and temples.

‘The wafers have been checked?’ Trice asked.

‘Nine times, each one,’ said Perfectus Mattaray. ‘To such a close degree of scrutiny, eight of the perfecti have suffered mental damage. Two have died.’

‘The efforts of the cipherists will not be forgotten,’ Trice assured him. ‘This is an extraordinary achievement. This is the articulation of apotheosis. For all of us.’

Mattaray nodded. ‘It is a shame, lord, that we had to do this so quickly. We would not have sustained injuries and losses if we had been given more time to complete the ciphering.’

Trice nodded. Again, he thought, the Diadochoi’s haste. The purity of my plan ruffled by his demands.

There lay the core of his despondency. There had been a time, when Trice’s great scheme had already been well developed and underway, when there had been no Diadochoi to factor in. Five years ago. Five years, was that all it was? Five years before, Trice’s intricate and occult network of intimates and contacts had introduced him to the hideously disfigured man, and so, almost by happenstance, brokered their partnership. The man’s brilliance and immeasurable talents had been too useful for Trice to reject. The plan had instantly taken a quantum leap forward and become something momentous and grand everything Trice had ever hoped for but never believed possible.

And he had become chief provost, and the disfigured man had become Oska Ludolf Barazan, Lord Governor Subsector, and together, through labour and genius and deceit, they had ascended the gleaming ladder of destiny to this day of days.

‘Chief provost?’ Revoke said. ‘It’s sunrise.’

Trice came out of his reverie. Sunrise, and still so much to do.

‘The officers of deliberation await you in the east wing,’ Revoke reminded him.

‘I’m coming,’ Trice said. He nodded to the perfecti. ‘Your work astonishes and delights me, and the Diadochoi thanks you for your pains.’

The perfecti bowed.

As they marched out of the vault, Trice glanced at Revoke.

‘Sunrise, you say? Stand the Ministry at condition gamma.’

Revoke pulled out his hand-vox. ‘This is Revoke on the command channel. Condition gamma. Repeat, we are at condition gamma.’

‘HEY, WHERE ARE you going?’ Kara said.

‘It’s dawnsong,’ replied Belknap, pulling on his coat. ‘Can’t you hear the bells?’

‘Yeah, they woke me,’ she yawned.

‘Here’s an idea, why don’t you come with me?’

Kara shook her head. ‘Plyton and I have got to brief the inquisitor at breakfast,’ she said. ‘Do you have to go?’

‘Yes,’ Belknap said, very directly.

‘Oh. It appears to me that you’re a very... devout person, aren’t you, Belknap?’

‘I suppose. Is there something wrong with that?’

She shrugged. They were standing in the doorway of the lock-up. Everyone inside was asleep, except Carl, who was toying with Belknap’s cogitator. The sink streets were quiet at last. Just empty walkways, littered with refuse from a heady night before. A few, dim figures hurried past to attend the local service.

‘Does my faith put you off?’ Belknap asked.

‘Put me off what, doctor?’ she asked.

He blushed as he realised what he’d said. ‘I meant... as a patient, you might be uncomfortable with me talking about my belief while I treat you. Some do, and I try not to. I know I should just be a medicae, not an

evangelist. There are others who should minister to the health of the spirit.'

'It doesn't bother me,' she said.

'But I almost insisted you attended temple...'

'And that seems to have paid off,' she grinned.

He scowled, but he wasn't offended. 'That's not quite what I meant. I was never a particularly religious man in my younger days. But on active service and working here, the things I've seen, I—'

'Patrik?'

He shook his head. 'Sorry. Kara, there's darkness everywhere, it seems to me. In this proud, almighty galaxy of ours, there's only war and corruption and infamy. I can't make sense of it. Unless I believe. Believe absolutely in the pure condition of mankind. It's the only thing that keeps me sane. And I truly believe that the quality and purpose of your remaining lifespan will improve if you embrace the love of the God-Emperor.'

'I do embrace it, Patrik. Just not the way you do. Doctor, are you trying to save me?'

He smiled. 'I think I am. In every meaning of that word.'

'Then, thank you. But will you forgive me if I do this my way. In the time I have left, there are many things I'd like to embrace.'

There was a quizzical look on his face. She stepped closer.

'Like what?' he asked, his voice tight.

Kara reached up on tiptoe and kissed his mouth. The kiss lingered for a few, delicious moments. Then he pulled away.

'Don't.'

'Why not?' she whispered.

'Because. Because I want you to. Because I want to touch you.'

'You've touched me already.'

'Yes, as your physician.'

'That's not what I meant.'

Belknap smiled and looked down. He cleared his throat. 'I can't, Kara. Because I know that if I start to touch you, I won't be able to stop.'

He buttoned up his coat and walked to the door. 'I'll be back in an hour,' he said.

'Patrik?'

'Yes?'

'Would you say a grace for my friend Zeph?'

'Of course,' Belknap went out and closed the door behind him.

'Mamzel Swole?'

Kara looked round. Plyton had appeared behind her.

'Are you all right?' Plyton asked.

Kara wiped her eyes. "Yeah. I'm fine.'

'Good. The inquisitor's calling for us.'



FIVE

PLYTON COUGHED, AWKWARD. ‘I don’t know how these things are done. I mean, in the Inquisition.’

‘So do it your way, junior marshal,’ I said.

She nodded and coughed again. ‘The morning before that ruckus at the diplomatic palace, I was called to the old sacristy adjoining the grand templum in A. There’s restoration work underway there, and one of the limners had found something.’

‘Something?’

Plyton clenched her teeth and sucked in a breath. ‘Yes. He’d found a false ceiling. The building’s very old, one of the hive’s first edifices. Its original ceiling had been architecturally boxed in and hidden.’

‘The fabric of temples is altered all the time,’ Carl said, sipping one of the polysty cups of hot caffeine Nayl had brought in from a street kettle stand.

‘Sure,’ said Plyton. ‘But this had been deliberately concealed. Anyway, that doesn’t matter. The limner brought it to the attention of the supervising cleric, an Archdeacon Aulsman, and upon inspecting the revealed roof, the archdeacon either committed suicide or was murdered by person or persons unknown.’

‘This limner’s gotta be high on the suspect sheet,’ Nayl said.

Plyton nodded at that. ‘Of course, sir. But he insisted it was suicide. And it looked like suicide to me.’

‘I like her,’ Nayl said, looking over at me. ‘She called me “sir”. Did you hear her call me “sir”?’

‘Oh, shut up you obnoxious grunt,’ Carl said.

‘Why did you think it looked like suicide, junior marshal?’ I asked.

‘Because I’ve seen plenty of them, inquisitor. But that is still not the point. I went up there, took some pics, looked around—’

‘What did you see?’ Kys asked.

‘Not much, mam,’ Plyton replied. ‘I was just looking through a hole in the plasterwork with a handlight. It was very dark. But I saw enough to know there was a spectacular ceiling up there. Very, very old, ornate, beautiful. There were golden figures, inset precious stones, a chart of some sort. There was a landscape too, rolling hills and woodland, temples. The figures all had haloes—’

‘A lovely golden place. Like a landscape,’ I played back my chair’s vox record. ‘Green hills, woods, a glade, all these beautiful people walking around with haloes of light around them. There were some buildings too. I think they were golden.’

‘Was that Zael’s voice?’ Kys asked.

‘Yes. The other night. When he told me his vision of Kara and the sacristy.’

‘But I never got to see that,’ Kara said.

‘I don’t think that matters,’ I said. ‘I think Zael was conflating details. He’s not trained.’

Carl snorted, as if to suggest that wasn’t ever going to happen now.

‘Continue, please, junior marshal,’ I said.

‘I took some pics, like I said. Used them as the basis of my report. The next day, I found that the case had been erased from my database and reassigned to another division. Shortly after that, my entire department was suspended by Interior Cases. There was some suspicion that Special Crime had made a procedural mishandling of the sacristy case and, furthermore, there was a link to the attempt on the chief provost’s life. We were stood down and sent home, to await interview.’

‘Your entire department?’ Carl asked.

‘Yes,’ she shrugged.

‘And then what?’ I asked.

‘I was sure something was wrong. I contacted a colleague. His name is... His name *was* Limbwall. I couldn’t reach my superior, in fact I haven’t been able to ever since. I believe he’s dead. Limbwall and I tried to piece things together. We knew that the sacristy was the key. Then...’

Plyton paused and glanced away for a second. ‘Excuse me. This is hard to talk about. Then the killers came for me, and they... uhm...’

‘They missed her,’ Kara said, getting up and pulling Plyton against her body in a tight hug. ‘They had her address. They murdered her uncle and his nurse. Maud did manage to slay one of the killers. From what Patience has told us, I think they were using the sheen birds as a murder weapon.’

‘Throne! Screw that!’ Kys muttered. ‘I never want to see those things again.’

‘Like Genny X,’ Nayl said.

‘What?’ I said.

‘On our first visit here,’ Nayl said. ‘A black marketeer Zael found for me. The same spec. Looks like the birds are our enemy’s weapon of choice when it comes to keeping things secret.’

I rolled my chair forward to face Plyton. ‘Are you all right to continue?’

She nodded, and smiled at Kara as she broke the embrace. ‘Limbwall and I decided to go to the old sacristy to scope around and take some more pics. Everything I’d shot at the scene of crime on the first day had been erased. So we went in last night. To our dismay, the place was as tight as a drum. They were building something in there.’

‘Who were?’ Carl asked.

Plyton shook her head. ‘Who knows? Ministry, I’m pretty sure. Agents of the Ministry of Subsector Trade. They run this city, as you may have noticed. As soon as we realised we weren’t getting in, Limbwall and I tried to get out. They came for us. They... they killed Limbwall. Just shot him. Just shot him dead...’

Plyton teared up again.

‘That’s when Maud and I ran into each other,’ Kara cut in. ‘Thanks to Zael, it seems. We made our escape and came here.’

‘Is that it?’ Carl said. ‘I don’t know what use this—’

‘No,’ said Plyton suddenly, glaring at Thonius. ‘There’s more. Limbwall managed to procure a file for me, before the department was shut down.’ She produced the crumpled folder and spread it out on the table. ‘I think he dug very deep to get this, very deep. It’s original street plans, from the first phase of the hive’s construction. Template records made by the pioneer builders and stored by the Scholam Architectus. The records of the city’s original planner, a man named Theodor Cadizky.’

‘Say that name again?’ Carl said.

‘Cadizky,’ Plyton repeated. ‘Why? Do you know him?’

‘If it’s the same man I think it is, yes,’ Carl said. He got to his feet and began to pace. ‘Golden Throne, I didn’t think any of his structures were still standing!’

‘Carl?’

‘Sir, Cadizky was an Imperial senior prominent in the pioneer expansion that originally settled this region. He was a chief Administratum advisor to the Lord Rufus Helican, Lord Bering Angelus and Lord Fedric Antimar, and you know where *those* names ended up. He was an architect, a city planner, a diviser, who believed – and this is evident in his writings – that the hive-cities of mankind should follow a pattern that, in his words, “must follow the gracious schemes of heaven”.’

‘You’ve read this material?’ Nayl asked.

‘Of course!’

‘The stuff you know,’ Kys smiled. Thonius bowed to her, mockingly.

‘Go on, Carl,’ I prompted.

He turned to face me. ‘Inquisitor, Cadizky was a genius, ahead of his time. He planned buildings that were designed to resonate with the warp. He constructed towers that channelled the Astronomican thanks only to their architectural structures. And, as it turned out, he was a madman. The ordos penanced him and later executed him, as an enemy of the Throne. All of his known works were demolished and levelled.’

Carl turned to the table and began to sort through the papers spilling out of Plyton's folder. 'And now we find—' He swallowed hard, agitated. 'And now it turns out this entire hive was constructed on plans he drew.'

'Which means what, Carl?' I said.

He stared at me. 'Give me time to process these charts. I'll be able to tell better then. But, on the face of it, I'd say Petropolis isn't a city. It isn't a hive.'

'Cutting you more slack than you deserve, Thonius,' Nayl said, leaning forward, 'what, on the face of it, are we talking about?'

Carl glared at Nayl. 'Damn you, bitch. That tone of yours is getting on my nerves. Why don't you trust my learning, just for once?'

'The question stands, Carl,' Frauka said quietly, rising to his feet from the chair in the back of the room. 'What are we talking about?'

Carl spread the papers out wide. 'Petropolis has grown, developed, overlapped itself, but its basic structure remains. You can see the axes. Ignore the distortion of more recent expansion. Here, see? And here? The plan remains, just as Cadizky arranged it in the original proposal of construction. There's a symmetry, an order, underlying every part of Petropolis that has been added since. An occult geography.'

'Look,' said Plyton, clearly unsure if she was supposed to butt in at this point but admirably positive she should. 'If Petropolis isn't a city, if it isn't a hive, as you said... what is it? What was it built for? What did Cadizky plan here?'

'An instrument,' Carl replied. 'A device. A spiritual resonator that would only begin to operate when it was filled with millions and millions of human beings.'

'Holy Throne!'

Everyone looked at me: Kara, Nayl, Kys, Frauka, Thonius and Plyton.

I realised I had been the one who had exclaimed.



SIX

THE IMMENSE, SEVEN-FOLD vault hatch opened slowly, like the petals of a flower blossoming. Jader Trice and Toros Revoke stepped inside, into the cool, pure air, into the hemisphere of light. They could hear the powerful air-scrubbers panting and gusting in the darkness above.

They were entering the chamber of the lexicon, directly three floors down from the Encompass Room.

The lexicon was a book, but it was not fashioned in the shape of any conventional book. Curving pages, printed on inert metal, were fixed to an axial spine, so that the lexicon took the form of a metal sphere, two hand spans in diameter. A stroke of the hand would peel the sphere open on a particular page, like parting the feathers of a bird.

But no hand had ever touched the lexicon. It hung in a sterile suspensor beam, each additional page fitted into it by the ring assembly of skeletal servo-arms sprouting like a crown below it on the deck. Reading beams, bright violet, maintained an assessment of the pages, scanning for errors or faults, watching for imperfections, even ones as slight as a rogue mote of dust.

No human had ever read the lexicon either. The primer had been compiled remotely via the servos. A very few secretists and cipherists had viewed individual pages, even studied particular sequences. But no one had regarded the plenary contents. No one had that much sanity or willpower. Yet.

Trice gazed at the layered metal globe suspended in the column of light. The chamber servitors approached him, shambling beetle-things painted surgical white or scrubbed to base metal, their hulls covered with purity seals.

‘Is everything ready for conveyance?’ Trice asked.

One of the servitors projected a hololithic reply, a moving diagram that showed how the entire west wall of the chamber would hinge away so that the lexicon could be carried, by means of manipulation beams into the hold cavity of a specially refitted bulk lifter.

Trice nodded, flicking his hands through the hololithic image to advance it. He flicked back to check several details.

‘The lifter pilot?’

‘A surgically lobotomised operator, as you specified,’ said Revoke. ‘General flight governance will come remotely from palace control.’

‘Who have you put on that?’

‘Galbrade,’ Revoke said. ‘The best pilot we have.’

‘It’s quite beautiful, don’t you think?’ Trice said, gazing at the lexicon.

‘Yes,’ said Revoke. ‘I think it is.’

Trice turned suddenly, hearing voices from above. He stared up at the observation gallery that ran around the chamber, high up. Revoke followed his gaze.

‘What is he doing here?’ Trice demanded.

The Diadochoi was wearing his public face. Culzean was with him, looking down at the lexicon as he listened to the Diadochoi talk. They were too far away for the words to be distinct, but the Diadochoi was evidently explaining the principles in detail.

Trice took a few angry steps towards the nearest staircase, but Revoke stopped him.

‘Go up there and do what?’ he said quietly. Trice’s eyes shone with bitterness, but he made no reply.

Revoke said, ‘You have enough things to do today without finding time for recriminations and arguments. Let it go.’

‘He is so contrary, so wilful. He shows me no respect.’

‘Sir, you were the instigator and master of this project from the start, but nevertheless you allowed him to become part of it. You could have refused

the partnership with him. I believe you didn't because you are afraid of him.'

Trice nodded slightly, his lips pursed. 'He is the most dangerous man I have ever met. Once our paths had crossed, there was no way I could disentangle myself from him. It was better to exploit his talents and tolerate his faults.'

'Then you should continue to do so.'

Trice nodded again, more emphatically now, and the two men started to walk back to the vault hatch.

'Remember,' Revoke said quietly, 'you made him. You made him part of this great project, you made him lord governor subsector, you made him Diadochoi and tonight, you will make him a god. The one thing you don't want to make him is your enemy.'

PATIENCE KYS MADE a revolted sound. 'Did you have to bring that thing in here?'

Nayl nodded. He had caught and killed a small sheen bird on the roof, and now was stripping it apart, using some tools and cutters he'd borrowed from Belknap. Metal feathers and dismantled chrome mechanisms lay on the white cloth Nayl had spread out on one of the smaller tables.

'I figure we need to know how these things work.'

Close up, dead, it was a miserable thing. Age and weather had worn it down to a silver wire skeleton, with stiletto-blade plumes and a secateur beak. Deposits of thick black filth and grease had built up in its crevices and contours, and it stank of pollution.

'Carl told me the sheen birds of Petropolis had been commissioned from the Guild Mechanicus by the city founders. Machine birds, you see. They were meant to be part of the architecture, programmed to simulate the flocking activities of real bird life, a mobile decoration to complement the city spires.'

Nayl grunted. 'The stuff he knows.'

‘After my encounter with them, I don’t think of them as decoration any more,’ Kys said. ‘And it all takes on a more sinister quality now we know about Cadizky. I mean, they were probably his idea, along with all the other hidden meanings and esoteric structures he laced into this city.’

‘Well, they’re hard to kill,’ Nayl said. ‘Look here,’ He took a stainless steel probe and levered open the sheen bird’s thorax, exposing the core of the mechanism. ‘I mean, they’ll break if you hit them hard enough, but the power source – it’s a solar-charging unit – and the miniature cogitation box are incredibly well protected. Meant to last forever, after all.’

‘How did you kill it?’ Kys asked.

‘I netted it and then hit it hard enough. The point is, it was one single, small, feral sheen bird, roosting up near the heating flues. It was not part of a flock, under control, or trying to kill me.’

Patience thought about that ruefully.

It was late morning, the day a clear, muzzy grey. There was an oddly muted sense of expectation in the air, but Kys was pretty sure she was projecting that herself. Carl, the marshal woman Plyton and the inquisitor himself were grouped around Belknap’s old, underpowered cogitator at the far end of the lockup, trying to discern some comprehensible pattern from the ancient – and incomplete – designs of the mad architect Theodor Cadizky. Nearby, close to where Nayl and Kys sat, Frauka was reclining on a stack of old mattresses, reading his slates and smoking non-stop. Zael lay on the little cot beside him. There had been no change in the boy’s condition.

Belknap was off running his morning surgery. In the lockup’s adjoining room, Kara was sorting through the weapons and equipment Carl and Frauka had managed to salvage from Miserimus before their hasty exit. It wasn’t much, though Patience was happy at least that her quiver of spare kineblades had been amongst it. Unwerth was helping Kara. On several occasions, Kys had overheard Ravenor suggest to Unwerth that he should slip away, return to his ship, and extract himself from the danger. Unwerth had refused. In fact, he had ‘obtusely strenuated the supposition,’ Kys was

glad. When the time came, they would need all the help they could get, and Unwerth had revealed himself to be a man of hidden talents: his loyalty, his endurance and his piloting skill being the three most notable revelations so far. And Kys hoped, that somewhere down the line, Unwerth might claim a degree of payback against the men who had tortured and brutalised him.

Kys considered taking a walk, just a few blocks, until she was clear of Frauka's blunting, so she could test how well her telekinesis had returned. But, suddenly, there was no time.

'You'd better all see this,' Ravenor said. Nayl called Kara and Unwerth in from the side room and the group gathered in around Belknap's cogitator.

'We're pretty much certain now,' Carl began, 'that the old sacristy is of particular importance because it is the point at which the axes cross. It's what Gadizky called "the true centre", the fulcrum on which his entire design turns. If Petropolis is a temple, then the old sacristy is the high altar.'

'So whatever they're planning to do,' said Kara, 'they'll do it there?'

'Yes,' Ravenor said. 'Now tell them the rest, Carl.'

'Well I started to run some basic searches and data-probes about the old sacristy, and ran into stuff. There's something going on. The grand templum is closed today, no reason given, and the immediate area has been sealed. We've got lots of irregular activity at the Ministry, the governor's palace and the Magistratum. Comm lines are very busy. Security's been heightened at state buildings. Road networks are closed in Formal A, some public data systems have been suspended. Air space above A has been restricted, what else?'

'It's happening now, today, tomorrow at the latest,' Ravenor said, and though his transponded voice was flat and toneless, Kys's spine prickled. 'So we don't have time to call for help, and we don't have time to devise a sophisticated plan to combat this. We have to go in right now and do whatever we can.'

'Ah,' said Nayl. 'The old-fashioned way. Let's load up.'

I WATCHED THEM prepare, selecting armour and weapons from the limited resources we had left. They were all eager, ready, and although we had no real plan and were outgunned to an almost comical degree, positive action felt so much better than hiding and waiting. Plyton came to speak with me.

‘Request permission to join your people on this, inquisitor,’ she said.

‘Granted, junior marshal. I hadn’t expected you to sit this one out anyway. May I call you Maud?’

‘Of course, inquisitor.’

‘Ravenor will do. Get what you need from Nayl, Maud. And may the Emperor protect you.’

I had prepared a report, storing the document in my chair’s memory, and now I made some final alterations to bring the facts up to date, and transferred it to a message tile.

‘Kara?’

‘Yes, Gideon?’

‘Take this, if you will, to the nearest clerk of law or legal practice. Belknap will know of one. Arrange for a clerk or lawyer to leave Petropolis at once with this tile, and travel to the nearest conurbation with an astrotelepathic office. He will then have the contents of this pod sent immediately to the ordos on Thracian Primaris. I’ve attached all the necessary codes. You’ll have to pay him well, so access our funds and use your discretion. I don’t really care what it costs.’

Kara picked up the little tile. ‘I’ll get right on it,’ she said.

I moved across the chamber and stopped beside Sholto Unwerth.

‘Master Unwerth, I know I am just wasting words, but you do not have to involve yourself in this.’

He looked at me and grinned. ‘I would be preferential to muck in and do some good. Unlike the name my old father straddled me with, I would like to be remembered as a man who had some worth.’

‘So be it. Please follow all the instructions my people give you. They are experts in what we are about to do.’

‘Which is?’ Unwerth cocked his head.

‘Walk headlong into death, destruction and all points inbetween.’

I left him laughing at that and approached Frauka in the corner of the room.

‘You won’t be coming in with us, Wystan.’

‘Oh,’ he said.

‘Why?’ he added after a moment.

‘Because I need someone to stay here with Zael. I need someone who can watch over him.’

‘Surely the medicae—’

‘I need someone who knows enough about what’s at stake to know what to do if he wakes before I return. Or what to do if I don’t return.’

He frowned and nodded. ‘I see. Well, you certainly can’t be asking the medicae that.’

‘If Zael is what we fear he is, you have the greatest immunity. It might be enough for you to get done anything that needs to be done, before it’s too late.’

‘Very well.’

‘Wystan, as far as I’m concerned, he’s still Zael. He’s still an innocent teenage boy, and he still deserves our protection. The moment you get a hint he’s anything other than that, act. And if I don’t come back, you won’t have a choice. The risk would be too great.’

‘I understand,’ said Wystan Frauka.

‘I NEED TO find the nearest reliable law office,’ Kara began as she walked into the surgery. ‘Maybe even a bail bonder or a notary or... what are you doing?’

Belknap was sorting medical instruments and dressing packs into his black leather practice bag. ‘Getting ready,’ he said.

‘For what?’

‘Nayl told me what was going on. He wanted to borrow some field dressings and wound kits. Well, if you’re going into a situation that you know is going to be violent, I think you need a trained combat medicae with you.’

‘Oh no—’ Kara began.

‘It’s not up for debate,’ Belknap said. ‘What happens if me being there to patch one of you up and get you back on your feet is the difference between success or failure today? I don’t even want to think about how much is at stake.’

Kara sighed. Belknap opened a metal foot locker and took out an object wrapped in an oil cloth. ‘Besides,’ he went on, ‘it’s a bonus if that medicae knows how to shoot,’ An old, well-worn, las-carbine came out of the cloth. It was Guard-issue, and had a folded skeleton stock. Belknap looked it over with practiced skill, then dropped it into his bag.

‘This is all because I kissed you, isn’t it?’ Kara said.

‘Yeah,’ smiled Belknap. ‘Probably is.’

LATER IN THE afternoon, a few spits of rain in the air, Belknap opened the metal shutters of his lockup’s loading bay, and the Bergman rumbled out onto the sink street, followed by the cargo-8. Belknap closed and locked the shutters, and then climbed into the cargo-8. A moment later, the two vehicles pulled away and joined the up-stack traffic.

From the grubby window of the lockup, Frauka watched them leave.

‘Just you and me now,’ he said.

Frauka took out his handgun, checked the load, set it on the table beside him and sat down next to Zael’s cot.



SEVEN

‘IT’S TIME, SIR,’ said Revoke. ‘The sixth hour.’

Trice knew that. He had just changed into the long grey robes prepared for the ritual, and in doing so had removed his pocket chron for the last time.

‘How do I look?’

‘Regal,’ said Revoke. ‘But we should be leaving now.’

Side by side, they left the state apartments and strode down the long hallway. ‘Reports?’ Trice asked as they walked.

‘The Diadochoi and the ritual cipherists are already en route to the sacristy. The anonymic wafers have been sent out to the axial temples. Our people there report capacity congregations for the evening masses. City media networks have been switched to our control and selective broadcast will begin shortly. Astropathic function for the entire hive is also secured and shut down. Situations says the crisis we stage-managed in Carbonopolis is monopolising global attention as we hoped. The perfecti of the geometricians confirms that the Encompass Room is aligned and composed.’

They reached the secure elevators. The duty guards bowed as they stood back to admit the chief provost.

‘Any problems?’ Trice continued.

With a low warble, the elevator began to carry them up through the palace.

‘Some crowd issues in Formal A,’ Revoke said. ‘Nothing serious, but a lot of people gathering. Some are worried about the terrorism reports from the second city and just want to get into the grand templum to pray. But a

lot more are there out of curiosity. We've closed the area down, but it's obvious from a distance that something big's going on.'

'How do we handle that?'

'I've already spoken to Sankels,' Revoke said. 'He's moving every available marshal from Interior Cases into the cordon zone to supplement the secretists. Sankels has assured me he's mobilised full crowd control and riot gear.'

'All right. That's good. Anything else?'

Revoke shook his head. The elevator came to a stop and the doors slid back to let them out onto the concourse of one of the small cap-level landing bays. A luxurious armoured flier with the crest of the Ministry on its stubby wings sat on the pad, engines idling. Two gunship escorts sat behind it.

Guards snapped to attention. The side hatch of the flier stood open and the chief provost hurried to it, Revoke with him.

They climbed into the passenger bay and an aide closed the hatch.

'Conveyance of the lexicon will begin in fifteen minutes,' Revoke said.

'Then we go to condition beta,' Trice replied.

The flier rose into the air and powered out of the landing bay with the gunships flanking it. It was already getting dark, and the immense city below spread out in a mass of gloomy monoliths and glittering lights.

WE WERE STILL streets away, but already it was clear that the precincts of the grand templum were the scene of some important event this night. A bright glow of searchlights lit up the sky beyond the nearby buildings and crowds of pedestrians were beginning to clot the approach roads. Overhead, fliers and gunships buzzed past with increasing frequency, some obviously patrolling the district.

'It's getting sticky,' Carl voxed. He was up ahead of me, riding in the Bergman with Kara and Maud Plyton. 'Lot of crowd build up and a palpable sense of unease, almost panic. We can see cordons now. Yeah, riot cordons. Armed marshals. Roadblocks too. They're checking all traffic.

Nothing's getting within a kilometre of the templum precinct except Magistratum vehicles.'

'Understood,' I said. I consulted my chair's filed charts of the templum area. 'Any suggestions?'

'Plyton says she and her pal got in last night by way of the north-west corner. It's a jumble of buildings, alms-houses and beneficent chapels and the like.'

'I see it on my chart.'

'The three of us might be able to slip in that way. I'd like to give it a try.'

'All right,' I replied. 'But be careful and stay in contact.'

Up ahead, through the front screen of the cargo-8's cab, we saw the Bergman pull off through the crowds down a side street and disappear.

'What about us, then?' Nayl asked from the wheel.

'We try the front way,' I said.

'Just walk in?' Kys asked, dubiously.

'Well, I could make everyone in the crowd and every marshal on that cordon line think we were a Magistratum truck full of riot officers, but I don't want to play the psyker card too early and get us picked up.'

'If you can't make us look like a Magistratum truck, why don't we just *use* a Magistratum track?' Belknap asked. 'I like the way he thinks,' Nayl said.

IT TOOK NEARLY twenty-five minutes to navigate around the backstreets of the district to the north-west corner of the templum precincts. But Carl's instinct had been good. The area was almost deserted. The crowds, evidently, were favouring the more public zones like the wide boulevards leading into Templum Square.

Plyton drove the purring Bergman into a cobbled lane that ran down the back of the Choristers' Hall, and pulled into a small yard. The old precinct buildings around them were deserted and dark though beyond them, in the south-east, the night sky was glowing with the powerful illumination set up around the templum.

The three of them got out and checked their equipment one final time. Plyton was wearing her black Magistratum body armour with the badges and insignia of Special Crime removed and, apart from her bolstered Tronsvasse 9, she carried a big, black pump-action riot gun that Nayl had found for her. Plyton seemed a big, bulky figure compared to the much shorter, curvier Kara, whose compact body was wrapped in a dark purple armoured bodyglove with a short tan jacket over the top. She carried the shivered sword across her back, and a bolt pistol in her hands.

‘Which way?’ Kara whispered.

‘Follow the light,’ Carl said, snidely.

‘We can do that,’ Plyton said. ‘But if we jink over to the left there, we can come in along the side of the Paupers’ School, and then be screened by the alms-house wall all the way down to the refectory and the gate lodge.’

‘The stuff you know,’ Carl mocked, checking his Hecuter then sliding it away under the long brown leather coat he was wearing.

‘What’s that?’ Kara asked, pointing at the tails of his coat.

Carl opened the leather coat and drew the sheathed blade out.

‘Throne, where did you get that?’

‘It’s one of the rhyming swords that incunabula used to kill Mathuin,’ Carl replied. ‘I found it in the rubble just before we left. I intend to shove it right back down the throat of whoever sent that thing.’

With Plyton leading, they scurried down the gloomy lane, and across into a paved courtyard lit by a single lamp. On the far side, it opened up into the circuit road that ran around the inner precinct proper. They could see the white cordon barriers running all along the street. A Magistratum riot crawler rumbled past along the circuit road.

‘Anyone around?’ Kara whispered.

‘Yeah, there’s a three-man patrol down there,’ Plyton replied. ‘Give it a sec. Yeah, they’ve gone round the corner. Go!’

The three of them dashed across the circuit road, ducked under the luminous white cordon, and into a small, unlit cobbled lane with the bulk of the Paupers’ School to their right. They hurried on, keeping their backs

to the wall. Kara signalled them to freeze as a six-man squad of riot officers in full armour jogged past the end of the lane.

Then she beckoned them on again.

Carl brought up the rear. He looked around and sniffed the cold night air. 'It's going to be a wild night,' he muttered.

A LARGE BLACK Magistratum truck came grumbling down the empty transit underway and Belknap stepped out from behind the cargo-8 waving his hands.

The truck came to a halt, engine running, and a marshal, looking huge in his riot armour, clambered down.

'What's the problem?' he crackled over his helmet vox.

'My eight's broken down. I was told to clear out of the area just now by some of you boys and then the damn thing stalled on me. Can you give me a hand? I'm no good with engines.'

The marshal signalled to his driver and followed Belknap around the cargo-8 to the open engine hatch. 'Surprise,' said Nayl, and shot him through the visor.

At the same moment, a kineblade whistled out and pinned the truck's driver to his seatback.

'Clear!' called Kys.

Unwerth jumped down from the tailgate of the cargo-8 and opened the back hatch of the Magistratum vehicle for me. Belknap, Nayl and Kys dumped the bodies of the marshals in our vehicle and locked it up. Then Belknap and Kys joined Unwerth and myself in the back of the Magistratum track and Nayl got in behind the wheel.

He put the big machine in gear and drove us away along the transit, turned right into one of the boulevards, and began to crawl through the pedestrian crowds gathering at the cordon across the mouth of Templum Square. There were two similar Magistratum tracks and a riot crawler in line ahead of us, and the marshals at the cordon had lifted the barriers aside to bring them through.

‘If anybody wants to pray for good fortune, they should do it now,’ Nayl said as we closed on the barrier. To my surprise, Belknap actually did what Nayl suggested, closing his eyes and mouthing the charm of sanctity under his breath.

Through the armoured hull of the truck, we could hear the anxious murmurings of the vast crowd.

‘Nearly there,’ Nayl said.

Eager to get the cordon closed and prevent the pressing crowd from spilling through, the marshals waved us on after the other vehicles.

We were in the huge plaza of Temple Square now. It seemed ominously empty after the bustle of the streets. The bulk of the grand templum towered ahead of us, lit up by dozens of powerful searchlight units that had been erected around the plaza. The huge white stab beams lanced up into the night sky and tracked slowly, occasionally catching on the fuselage of one of the patrol fliers circling low over the area. There were a lot of riot marshals on the ground around the templum, along with figures in grey suits. I noted that at least three of these grey figures were managing weapon-servitors on leashes.

Marshals with lighted batons were ushering us over to park with other Magistratum trucks in the plaza on the east side of the templum. There were dozens of vehicles drawn up there already. Nayl pulled us in on the far side of them, so line of sight from the main activity around the front entrance to us was blocked by the parked trucks.

‘What’s the time?’ Kys asked.

‘Nearly seven-thirty,’ I replied.

JADER TRICE CLIMBED out of his flier and walked clear, keeping his head low as it rose away again, into the search-lit sky. Revoke led the chief provost in through the main entrance of the grand templum, and the secretists and marshals all around them broke into spontaneous applause.

‘Thank you,’ smiled Trice. ‘Thank you all.’

Boneheart awaited them in the immense nave.

‘Everything is secure. All units report steady status, condition beta.’

‘Excellent,’ Trice said, straightening his robes.

‘The lexicon is two minutes away,’ Boneheart added.

‘I want to see it arrive,’ Trice said. ‘Where’s the Diadochoi?’

‘Already in the sacristy,’ Boneheart replied. ‘He went through as soon as he touched down, along with the cipherists.’

‘And Culzean?’

‘Culzean was with him, sir.’

Trice turned to Revoke. ‘I’d like you to come with me, Toros. After all your work, you should witness this too.’

‘I should stay and supervise—’ Revoke began.

‘Everything’s covered,’ Boneheart said. You go on.’

Revoke nodded to Boneheart and followed the chief provost out through the west entrance and along the wide exterior cloister to the old sacristy. This building too was floodlit, the vertical searchlight beams like the bars of a giant cage around it.

‘Day of days,’ Trice murmured.

‘This is a great moment for you, sir,’ Revoke replied. ‘A culmination.’

‘A great moment for us all,’ Trice said.

They entered the old sacristy.

The vault was lit by thousands of glow-globes. Ministry contractors had erected a large circular dais under the domed roof, the centre of the dais positioned directly beneath the apex of the dome. Ranks of seating had been built into the edges of the dais, facing inwards and, at the compass points, sleek obelisks of resonant stone had been set upright in sockets, each one corresponding exactly to the axes of the hive’s occult geometry. Trice climbed up the short flight of steps onto the dais, seeing Culzean and his bodyguard sitting amongst the other senior cipherists and dignitaries in the seating section. Culzean nodded to Trice, but Trice chose to ignore him.

The air was clean and cold. The central area of the wide dais was empty, except for the hub of suspensor rods poking up through the precise centre of the stage. Around this hub stood the thirteen grey-robed cipherists chosen to officiate the Enunciation. The Diadochoi was with them.

‘What is he wearing?’ Trice hissed to Revoke.

The Diadochoi was not dressed in the grey ritual robes Trice had so carefully designed and made. He was wearing a tailored gown of scarlet velvet and a long shrouding mantle.

‘Lord,’ Trice said, approaching the Diadochoi.

The Diadochoi turned and smiled at Trice. He was using his public face, the face of Oska Ludolf Barazan.

‘Jader! Our great day reaches its climax. Aren’t you excited?’

‘Lord, you should be changed by now. The ritual robes—’

‘Too drab for an occasion like tonight. I will be wearing this.’

‘Not drab, lord,’ Trice fought to contain his fury. ‘I designed the robes to be inert, so that they would not, by colour or design or pattern, threaten the purity of—’

‘You worry too much, Jader,’ the Diadochoi said. ‘Hush up now. See? The lexicon is here.’

Trice was about to explode with rage, but Revoke squeezed his arm and shook his head. Everyone looked up.

The ages-old false ceiling of the sacristy roof, accidentally penetrated by a simple limner, had been torn out. The real roof, the original dome, was now revealed. The sheer beauty of the ancient frescoes: the haloed figures, the golden temples, the idyllic pastoral landscape, stilled Trice’s anger for a moment. Perfection unveiled. Paradise found.

This, Trice considered, was what had driven Archdeacon Aulsman to suicide. The sheer heresy of it. For all its ornamentation, for all its lapis and selpic, its silver-etched constellations, this was Theodor Cadizky’s handiwork. There was no God-Emperor, no primarchs, no illustrious holies of the Imperial creed. What the frescoes showed, and boldly proclaimed in their inscriptions, was a prelapserian Eden, where ordinary men and

women walked upon the face of Terra and were bestowed with the power of gods. Around them were the esoteric marks of a great chart, a mirror of the scribings the geometricians had wrought upon the floor of the Encompass Room. The perfect axial alignment of the hive's mechanism, the occult order and the lines of power that Cadizky had built into his Petropolis.

‘Lexicon conveyance approaching,’ Revoke said, as his headset bipped.

‘Open the shutter,’ said the Diadochoi.

With a whirr, the central portion of the dome high above them slid open, leaves of metal unfolding around each other. They could hear the jetwash of a lifter hovering over the roof.

‘Time?’ Trice asked.

‘Ten minutes to eight, sir.’

‘We are at condition alpha,’ said Trice.

KARA, PLYTON AND Carl had reached the north-east gate lodge of the templum precinct. The old sacristy was ahead of them now, swathed in light.

‘Cover!’ Carl hissed. They ducked into the shadows as the roar of an approaching lifter echoed around the old walls.

‘Gods!’ said Plyton, peering out. Blazing with stab-lights, a heavy lifter was coming in over the domed roof of the old sacristy, caught in the beams of the flood-lamps. It hovered in place, the noise of its engines shrill, and projected an intense white beam down from its belly, apparently into the top of the dome.

‘Ravenor! Ravenor!’ Carl voxed anxiously. ‘It’s started. Something big is happening!’

ON THE EAST side of the grand templum, we got out of the Magistratum track. There was no longer any time to worry about the risks of discovery. I slid my chair up around the outer wall of the templum, heading for the main entrance. Belknap and Nayl followed me, running. Nayl, a huge

shape in his brown armoured bodyglove, held a custom plasma rifle up to his chest. He'd fitted it with an underbarrel grenade launcher. Belknap, leaner than Nayl, in his black army fatigues and long, billowing leather coat, cut a romantic figure, like a pirate or a swashbuckler. He carried his practice bag in his left hand.

Kys and Unwerth went the other way, looping around the north side of the templum. Dressed in a tight green skinsuit, her hair loose, Kys was forced to rein in her long stride so that the diminutive Unwerth could keep up. Patience had a twinned pair of laspistols, and she'd drawn them. Her four kineblades remained sheathed in the boning of her bodice.

'Keep up, Sholto!'

'In all affectation, I am racing as fast as my foreshortened under limbs can go! I am not provided with lissom leggage such as you display, mamzel!'

'Lissom leggage?' Patience said. 'Did you just compliment me, Sholto?'

'I believe something of that formature may have slid out.'

Suddenly there were shapes ahead of them. Figures. Riot marshals and at least two secretists in grey.

Kys didn't hesitate. Running towards them, she began firing her laspistols. 'Unwerth! Let's go! We're in it now!'

'AND SO WE begin,' Nayl said lightly, as the mass of marshals and secretists covering the main entrance of the grand templum spotted us.

No more hiding.

'Fire at will, Harlon. Let's see how many we can take with us.'

Massing forward, the agents of our enemy had begun bellowing challenges, but at least one of them clearly knew an armoured support chair was a warning sign. They began firing. Riot guns boomed in the mailed fists of Interior Cases officers, and the lasguns and pistols of the secretists quickly joined them.

'Get down!' I transponded and began to let rip with my psy-cannon. My shots ripped through the front rank of riot marshals at a distance of

twenty-five metres, bursting their armour and sending them sprawling. I did not slow my pace. Shots struck my chair's front and bounced off. Belknap had sensibly ducked in behind me, using my chair as a shield.

Nayl to the left of me hit the deck, rolled and came up on his knees as gunfire ripped over him and pummelled the sides of the Magistratum transporters parked behind us. He began to fire, raking with his plasma rifle, simultaneously pumping grenades from the under-barrel launcher.

Mayhem swept across the Templum Square in front of the great church. A ferocious ripple of explosions from Nayl's launcher raised fireballs across the broken flagstones and up the entrance steps, sending bodies flailing into the air. His plasma bolts licked like daggers of sunlight, blowing men apart or ripping through them.

Sirens began to sound. Pausing only to reload his launcher from the pack on his hip, Nayl was up again, running and firing.

Boiling smoke now swathed the main entrance. The air was full of gunfire and confused yelling. I skimmed forward over tangled, crumpled bodies.

'Carl!' I voxed.

There was no answer. Somewhere off to my left, Nayl was exchanging a furious barrage of shots with the wrong-footed enemy. I heard the bang of shotguns, the crack of las-weapons, a melody syncopated by the fierce, squealing shriek of his plasma rifle.

Straight ahead of me, two weapon-servitors bounded out of the thick, black smoke raised by Nayl's munitions. They were huge, chromed cannon-hounds, unslipped and ready to kill. Their pink recognition beams found my bulky shape at once.

+Belknap! Down!+

The medicae ducked behind my chair, not so much because I had told him to but because I had layered my will into the telepathic burst, forcing him to drop. The gunpods on the servitors' backs began to fire, drizzling me with murderous fire from their four lasrifles.

Fortunately, the adepts of the Guild Mechanicus, who had manufactured my support chair at Gregor Eisenhorn's personal request, had made it with the same care they used for main line battletanks and striding war titans.

The devastating onslaught spattered off my housing like rain. The cannon-hounds hesitated, bemused. I knew my chair would not easily withstand a second full-on salvo.

I reached out with my psy and lifted one of the hounds off its feet, activating its gunpods as I swung it around to face its companion. Crippled by the first blizzard of las-bolts, the other hound instinctively returned fire, and the two weapon-servitors destroyed each other in a searing exchange of close range shots.

I let the ruined servitor go and it crashed to the ground, parts of its mechanism spilling out and scattering across the flagstones. Its companion had been fused into a crater by the ferocity of fire.

I moved forward again. A secretist I had not seen came out of the whirling smoke to my left, aiming a longlas.

Behind me, Belknap raised his lascarbine out of his practice bag and shot the man three times through the torso, slamming him onto his back. 'Thank you,' I said. 'But I could have covered it.'

'Just trying to be useful,' Belknap replied.

THE SUSPENSOR BEAM shafted in through the open shutter and the lexicon, a tiny dark sphere, descended into the old sacristy. The suspensor rods below in the middle of the dais crackled as they activated and took the weight of it, lowering it gently until it sat at waist height in the middle of the chamber.

The beam from above snapped off, and the lifter pulled away. The shutter gradually began to lock back in place.

The Diadochoi stepped towards the slowly revolving lexicon held in the beam of light. The thirteen cipherists closed around him.

'The first Enunciation will now begin,' the Diadochoi said. 'Jader, take your seat.'

Trice nodded humbly and backed away towards the seating.

‘Time?’ he asked.

‘Eight-oh-two,’ replied Revoke.

‘Send the signal to the axial temples. Tell the clerics to begin enunciating the anonymic wafers.’

‘Signal is sent,’ Revoke replied. Trice sat down in the front row of the dais seating. Beside him, Revoke took a seat and then immediately got to his feet again, his hand to his forehead.

‘Toros?’

‘An alert, sir. Trouble at the main entrance of the templum. And...’

‘What?’ Trice hissed.

‘Unleashed psychic power. Very strong, very urgent. I can taste him. It’s Ravenor.’

Trice went pale. ‘Go,’ he breathed. ‘Go now. And kill him, for damnation’s sake!’

Revoke hurried down off the dais, out of the sacristy and began to sprint down the cloister towards the grand templum.

BEHIND THE GRAND templum, Kys ceased fire. Faced by her brutal assault, the five marshals and three secretists she had encountered had tried to fall back into cover around the north porch so they might cut her down while she was still in the open. But she had nudged out with her telekinesis and frozen them all in their tracks: startled, immobile targets. The yard was now littered with their bodies.

Kys looked back at Unwerth. The barrel of the machine pistol he had tied to his hands was smoking. He had not hesitated when the shooting began.

‘Nice work,’ she said.

‘I try my part, as it goes.’

Ahead of them around the curve of the grand templum and the outcrop of the north porch, the back of the old sacristy was lit up by floodlights.

Pulling away from the domed roof, a brightly lit lifter was beginning to climb up into the night sky.

‘I think we’re missing the main event,’ Kys said. ‘Follow me.’

‘I would, mamzel, excepting for that discomforting sound.’

Patience Kys came to a halt and looked around. A figure stood just inside the doorway of the north porch, urgently spinning a psyber lure around himself.

High above them, a furious clinking rang out of the night: the beating of steel wings. Called out of the air, from every building in the formal, the Unkindness formed into a seething ball overhead, glittering and flashing in the floodlights.

‘Not again,’ Unwerth stammered.

‘Sholto. Get behind me,’ said Patience Kys. ‘Get behind me now.’

Forming themselves into a slender arrowhead, the sheen birds banked upwards, then dipped and streamed down to shred them both.

WOUNDED IN THE thigh, limping, Harlon Nayl swung around and cut down two more secretists with his plasma rifle. He could see the main entrance of the grand templum, swathed in smoke, most of which he had created. But he no longer had sight of either Ravenor or Belknap.

The Templum Square looked like a battlefield, like the streets of a city where civil war had raged. The fury of his one-man gun battle with the marshals and secretists had sent panic cascading through the already jumpy crowds at the edge of the square. A full-scale riot had broken out along the approach roads and boulevards. Nayl knew he had to get to the old sacristy. He limped forward, ignoring the distant echoes of gunfire and screaming issuing from the darkness and the smoke.

Then something more solid came out of the smoke and kicked him in the face. Nayl went down on his hands and knees and lost his grip on the plasma rifle.

Boneheart threw a killing punch down at Nayl’s spine, but Nayl rolled onto his back, his mouth bleeding, and captured the punch in the cup of his

hands. Still on his back, he tightened his grip like a vice and fractured the hand bones and fingers in Boneheart's fist.

Boneheart screamed in pain and staggered away, clutching his hand. Kicking himself back onto his feet, Nayl drew his Hostec autos and pumped eight shots through Boneheart's body.

The secretist juddered and fell. A pistol in each hand, Nayl circled, checking for other surprises. There was no one in sight, no one alive, anyway. So why did he feel like—

A blade struck out of nowhere, so hard and fast Nayl had barely time to react. He lurched backwards and the blade sliced off the muzzles of both his weapons.

He tossed the ruined guns aside and hunched in low, turning, wary. Monicker, a scarcely-visible phantom in the smoky air, danced around him and stabbed with her serrated blade. Nayl felt the rip gouge his back, right through his armoured bodyglove.

Desperately, he turned around, but the phantom had already vanished.

Keeping behind the big man, always behind him, Monicker closed for the kill.

WITH BELKNAP BEHIND me, I hovered into the nave of the grand templum. It was an empty and silent space, in shocking contrast to the violent night outside.

'This way,' I said to Belknap.

A man in a grey suit ran in through the west entrance ahead of us. He had stale yellow eyes, like dying suns. He slowed down and began to pace towards us.

'Imperial Inquisition!,' I announced. 'Surrender now.'

'I know who you are,' he said.

I knew who he was too. He wrenched out with his mind and slammed me backwards. Belknap tried to shoot him, but the yellow-eyed man merely nodded and tossed the good doctor twenty metres backwards through the

air. Belknap cracked a pew as he landed. He rolled onto the floor, unconscious.

+Let's go!+ I sent, and went fleshless. Revoke met me head on, forming a barbed, red spectral form that tasted of sour wine and ripped right through my mental shields. I foundered back, as exposed as the inner flesh of a seafood delicacy broken from its shell at a supper table.

Aware of the stench of my own mental wounds, I reinforced my armour and met Revoke again, lancing skewers of psy-force into his red mind form. They transfixed him like quills.

He howled.

The aftershock rattled the wooden pews of the grand templum and blew out several windows. I pushed the skewers deeper, becoming an urchin-form laden with metre-long spines. Revoke screamed again, and broke away, shattering the spines like glass. He circled into the upper limits of the grand templum taking the form of something vaguely bat-winged whose distressing shape was described by more than four dimensions. It extruded long, fibrous tentacles that lashed me, stripping away my perfunctory shielding, and savaged the edges of my mind. In desperate defence, I made my fleshless form blade-sharp and drove upwards through the flailing tentacles, severing some, until I punctured the wet core inside the bat-shape.

Shuddering, Revoke's body fell to its knees. Blood drizzled out of his eyes and nose. He tightened his mind, folding the alien bat form up into a tiny red dot, then unfolding the dot as a complex geometric form. The shape began to self-repeat and fill the air with copies of itself at an exponential rate. The multiplying geometric forms smelled of burnt blood and old bones.

I tried to turn, seeking space to fight back. They were all around me.

There was a violent snap which felt like the entire planet had been pulled out of gravity like a fruit being plucked off a bough. The foul geometric forms, hundreds of them now, rushed in together, fitting tightly against one another like the teeth of a fractal dragon, catching my mind between

them. This was constriction like nothing I had ever known. Not biting, but crushing, being caught between complex shapes that fitted against each other so perfectly that there was no space between them for anything else to exist.

I was being crushed into nothing, compressed so tightly that the only place I could go was outside reality to my doom.

I tried to break free. I couldn't. I couldn't.

KARA, CARL AND Plyton rushed the north door of the old sacristy and crouched in the shadows. From their point of concealment they could see the newly-built dais and the hooded cipherists gathered around the slowly turning sphere hanging in the column of light.

'We should—' Plyton began.

'Wait!' Carl cried. 'Terra's sake! That's Governor Barazan!'

The Diadochoi reached his hands into the light and opened the metal leaves of the lexicon. He began to read, announcing the unannounceable.

Plaster fell from the ceiling. Lightning flared in the sky above. The Diadochoi enunciated the first few syllables of creation.

Fed with power, the resonating obelisks began to shine. With a numbing rush, ethereal white light flared out of the sacristy and soared in solid bands down the axes of the city. Every single one of the nine hundred and ninety-nine churches was lit up by the beams. The clerics had been halfway through reading out the anonymic wafers. Now they continued, as burning light suffused their congregations with auras of flame.

In the radiance of the old sacristy, the Diadochoi played his hands over the lexicon, declaiming the un-words of power, the anti-language that was Enuncia.

He paused and reached up to take off his public guise. The mask of Oskar Ludolf Barazan flopped down to the floor of the dais.

The burned, scarred, true face of the Diadochoi was revealed, a vile mass of seared tissue, raw flesh and lipless teeth.

He fanned his hands out, fluttering the spinning metal pages of the lexicon again and read out the words so revealed.

A halo surrounded him. Piece by piece, his body was restored, flesh reknitting and recreating, gloving his hands in skin, sweeping across his raw skull to resculpt a face. Meat, skin, hair, all reformed, bright and new.

‘Oh Holy Throne!’ Kara cried.

‘What?’ asked Plyton. What is it?’

‘It’s Molotch,’ said Carl Thonius. ‘It’s Zygmunt bastard Molotch.’



EIGHT

KARA AND THONIUS ran forward into the sacristy, into the almost blinding radiance. Plyton was right behind them.

Their first shots cut down the secretists who tried to prevent them from reaching the dais. Some of the seated guests reacted in alarm, but most were too entranced by the cosmic wonder unfolding at the centre of the stage.

Carl was first on the platform, his Hecuter blazed into the light. Two of the officiating cipherists went down, bright red blood leaking from their bodies across the white platform. The radiant light flickered for a second and the lexicon vibrated, as if disturbed.

Molotch turned, the sudden displeasure on his face changing to a smile as he recognised Carl, and Kara behind him.

Hands still playing the pages of the lexicon, he formed new un-words that first froze and then evaporated the shots from Carl's pistol and Kara's bolter in mid-air before they could reach him.

Then he spoke another un-word .

The force of it hit them like a wrecking ball. Plyton was thrown right back off the dais. Kara, hurled into the air, crashed into the raised seating, breaking both it and herself. She felt ribs and collarbone go before pain blacked her out and left her sprawled amongst the broken wreckage of the seats.

Carl had taken the full force of the un-word. His coat and most of his clothing was shredded off, his skin blistered. His back had hit the platform so hard that it had dented under him. It felt as if all his internal organs had been pulped and his mind set on fire.

Carl Thonius screamed, partly in pain, but mostly in helpless fury.

They had left it too late. Molotch was now far too powerful for any of them to stop.

THE UNKINDNESS SLICED in and Patience Kys met it with a laspistol in each hand and four kineblades orbiting her lean figure. Her telekinetic gifts had never been tested by such a huge and complex threat before, but she didn't falter. The guns began firing, flicking from target to target between shots. Exploded, smoking sheen birds fell out of the rushing formation. The four kineblades swept into the oncoming flock like surface-to-air missiles. She drove each one independently, slicing them through individual birds and immediately on into the next.

She also hit the birds themselves with her telekinesis. She caused collisions, impacts that sheered wings off, even hammered some sheen birds beak-first into their neighbours like iron nails.

In seconds, before the Unkindness had even reached her, hundreds of their broken chrome forms littered the flagstones.

But there were too many, too many even for her formidable talents. Suddenly they were all around her, and she was pushing the swirling mass away from her in every direction as she continued to shoot, and stab with her blades.

Rips began to appear all over her arms and legs. She heard Unwerth, right behind her, cry out in pain as part of the whirling metal blur ripped into his arm. Then another sheen bird struck his forehead square on and dropped him to the ground, barely conscious.

Concentrating hard, Kys howled out in frustration. She was killing a dozen birds every second, but it just wasn't enough. She felt a metal flight feather rip across her temple, a beak tear one knuckle, a fluttering chrome edge slice through her left shoulder.

Still she fought on, blasting point blank and sewing her kineblades through the dense storm of bodies.

Then she staggered backwards as a bird got past her and hit her in the face. Blood poured down her left cheek. With a desperate grunt, she flared

out her telekinesis and billowed the entire flock away from her for a second's respite.

But only for a second. It immediately rushed back. She no longer had the strength to drive it away.

THE PHANTOM WITH the knife put another deep cut into Nayl's body and he hollered in pain. He was fast for a man of his size, but this half-there daemon was a great deal more nimble.

The only thing Nayl had going for him was experience.

He couldn't see his opponent, not well enough to fight back effectively.

So he didn't try. He closed his eyes. And there she was.

He could smell a sweet, female scent that showed him her position as clearly as if he'd seen her.

Monicker lunged in, her blade about to rip into Nayl's liver. A fist hit her instead.

She fell, shocked, hurt, suddenly frantic. He was on her, pinning her with his weight.

Nayl looking down at the transparent shape he held, pressed to the ground beneath him.

'What are you?' he growled.

For a moment, Monicker flashed like a mirror and was him, another Nayl looking back at himself. That usually worked. That usually disorientated an opponent quite long enough for her to finish her wetwork.

Nayl looked at himself.

'Fancy that,' he said, and broke her neck.

SECRETIST FOELON, SPINNING his psyber lure, stalked across the square towards the swirling ball of the Unkindness, grounded like a dust-devil over the flagstones. The shooting from inside the flock had stopped. The targets were undoubtedly dead by now.

Foelon felt his spinning lure twitch oddly. It abruptly began to ignore the laws of centrifugal physics. Dragging hard against his struggling arm, it

lashed backwards in a whip crack and wrapped five times around his throat.

Foelon gagged out a terrified gasp. The lure pulled tight, so tight it lifted the secretist off the ground and lynched him in mid air.

The Unkindness burst apart, the mass of it exploding away in all directions from the central focus, spilling out across the square, dissipating.

It left in its wake thousands of dead or damaged sheen birds, carpeting the flagstones like autumn leaves. And Patience Kys, still standing, her clothes ragged, her flesh covered in scratches and cuts.

She bolstered her spent laspistols, mind-called her now-buckled kineblades back to her, and looked up at the hanged man dangling in the air.

Kys turned her back on Foelon and let him fall to the ground. She bent down beside Unwerth. He was groggy and covered in cuts himself.

‘We’ve got to move,’ she said. He nodded and got up.

Side by side, they struggled round to the old sacristy. It was lit up, not so much by the massive floodlight arrays, but by the huge beams of white-light radiance that poured out of it and blazed away along the axial strands of the city.

They hobbled to the doorway. Plyton lay on the threshold, badly knocked about.

‘What happened?’ Kys yelled over the hurricane roar of the light.

‘Kara and Thonius are inside,’ Plyton gasped. ‘But the man hurt us all bad. I fell. I managed to crawl here.’

‘What’s going on in there?’

‘Some kind of ritual,’ Plyton yelled back. ‘So bright. So much power...’

‘We’ve got to get in!’ Kys said.

‘That isn’t permissive,’ Unwerth shouted to her. He’d already tried to walk into the light flaring out of the doorway, but it was like a solid barrier.

Kys pushed her hands against it, felt the light crackle and pulse like a telekinetic field.

There was no way in.

CARL TRIED TO move, tried to rise. It felt as if the howling light was pushing him down into the decking of the dais. He fought against it, drawing mental strength from his long hatred of Zygmunt Molotch and the shock of seeing the bastard alive.

He sat up.

His hands still flitting over the lexicon's metal pages, Molotch looked round as he noticed Carl stir. He whispered an un-word, almost as if he were blowing Thonius an affectionate kiss.

Carl fell backwards, screaming. It felt as if his entrails had been ripped out.

Molotch returned to his enunciation.

Up in the seating, Culzean suddenly jumped up.

'Diadochoi! Diadochoi!' he yelled, trying to make himself heard over the monumental clamour.

'Take your seat!' Trice yelled, getting up too. 'How dare you disrupt the —'

'Look! Look, you fool!' Culzean bellowed back in his face. 'Look!'

Carl Thonius had risen to his feet. A filthy red light throbbed out of him, backlighting his skin and making silhouettes of his bones. In the ethereal brilliance of the sacristy, he was like a drop of blood in a pail of milk.

He raised his right arm and the flesh crisped away like burning paper, exposing the blackened arm bones and the long fingers that sprouted into talons.

'That's Slyte,' Culzean stammered. 'In the name of darkness, that's Slyte!'



NINE

MOLOTCH SAW WHAT faced him. Disbelief twisted his face. He opened his mouth and blasted the glowing red figure with a stream of Enuncia so violent it made the dais shake.

Carl withstood it and his own dark, red light seemed to grow stronger as if he was drinking the power in. He moved forward, his black talons rising.

The remaining cipherists broke and fled, except for one who was too slow. Carl's black bone-claws shredded him and spattered the white staging with wide patterns of blood.

Molotch tried a final un-word, but Carl clawed at him. Molotch staggered back across the dais, yowling, the left side of his face torn off. Carl lashed round and ripped his claws through the spinning metal pages of the lexicon, tearing them away. Metal sheets shivered into the air, tumbled out of the suspensor beams, and fluttered onto the deck. Ripped and incomplete, the lexicon itself toppled off its support and crashed to the deck.

The storm of noise grew louder. An infernal red quality now began to tinge the white radiance, as if that one drop of blood was staining the milk pink.

Tears streaming down his face, Jader Trice ran forward and tried to gather up the torn and buckled pieces of the lexicon. They burned his hands. He looked up.

Carl bent down over him and gently placed his black, bone-hand on the top of Trice's head, like a temple deacon administering a benediction.

Jader Trice rotted away into a dry, mummified husk, then that too disintegrated, and scattered away as dust on the wind.

Carl turned and moved towards the dignitaries in the seating sections. Most were fleeing for their lives, jumping over the back of the dais.

‘Ley!’ Culzean cried. ‘Cover us now!’

Leyla Slade pulled out her custom handgun and fired six times, not at the oncoming daemon, but at the dais stage in front of it. As each specialised bullet impacted, there was a burst of green vapour.

The hooktors bubbled into being. Six of them, each one twice the size of a large man, released from their bondage in the painstakingly engraved bullets.

They were slaughter-daemons of Nurgle, mindless warp-forms of immense physical power, each one a noxious, sticky cluster of diseased eyes, bulging from a swollen, panting body sack of reptile flesh and pulsing viscera. The hooktors moved on tripods of long, membranous limbs, like the furred wings of ancient flying lizards. Each limb culminated in a huge, hooked toenail, a hoof-claw as heavy and grey as stone.

They made their terrible gibbering. The wretched, faecal stink of them filled the air. Thumping forward on their hideous toenails, they attacked Carl with unthinking frenzy.

Culzean and Slade together grabbed hold of the gravely disfigured Diadochoi.

‘Time to go, lord!’ Culzean yelled. ‘The hooktors will hold it off long enough for us to make our escape!’

The Diadochoi mumbled out some mangled words, blood pouring from his ripped face.

‘No arguments now,’ Culzean cried. They manhandled the Diadochoi off the dais.

Behind them, Carl and the hooktors tore each other apart.

WHEN HARLON NAYL limped into the grand templum, the first thing he saw was my support chair, motionless, halfway down the nave. Facing it,

ten metres away, knelt a dark-haired secretist, blood running from his nose and the corners of his staring, stale-yellow eyes.

Nayl knew what this was. He could feel the queasy trembling in the air around him that told him these two, motionless figures were engaged in a titanic, invisible battle.

As fast as he could move his injured limbs, Nayl ran forward, hoping he could slay the secretist psyker while he was still out of his skin and physically vulnerable. The only weapon Nayl had was Monicker's serrated dagger.

Revoke's psy-control was staggering. He had left a sliver of his mind aware of his surroundings, to protect it from harm. He saw Nayl coming forward, and barked an un-word that punched Nayl in the stomach and dropped him to the ground.

But not before Nayl had hurled the dagger.

It stuck through Revoke's right shoulder. Revoke yelped in pain and his grip on me slipped. I felt the clenching geometric forms loosen ever so slightly as Revoke fought to retain control and grind me to oblivion.

All of my mind's power was focused on the one, stark desire to pull free. As Revoke's hold slackened, that single impulse squirted out and expressed itself physically instead. For a moment, my entire will channelled itself into the motivator systems of my chair.

My armoured chair slammed down the nave, crunching straight into Revoke's kneeling body and dragging it along. Revoke was still draped across the front of my chair when it struck the massive bronze altar at the end of the nave at close on forty kilometres an hour.

My chair rebounded, shivering backwards. Revoke's limp, broken corpse tumbled off onto the flagstones.

I fought to regain my wits. I was hurt, exhausted, my mind trembling from the agonies of the fight.

Back down the nave, Nayl was helping the unsteady Belknap to his feet. I powered out through the west entrance and on towards the old sacristy.

It was blazing with light, but that light was now stained with red, and the stain was spreading along the sizzling axial beams blasting out across the city. Flames licked at the shattered windows, and sections of the dome, crackling and ablaze, were falling in.

Ahead of me I saw Kys, Plyton and Unwerth.

‘There’s no way in!’ Kys yelled at me.

There had to be.

KARA BLINKED AND looked up. The energised wind was shrieking around the buckled dais, and flames were gusting up the sacristy walls, reducing the ancient, precious frescoes of the caving dome to billowing particles of glowing ash.

The light was red, not just from the flames, but from the energy radiating from the centre of the platform. What had been white and pure was now crimson and thick.

She tried to move, but her body was too badly hurt. Bones broken, internal organs flaring with pain.

‘Oh, God-Emp— ahh! God-Emperor!’ she gasped out. She turned her head and saw the splattered gore and torn flesh of hook-nailed daemon-things covering the dais. What the hell had happened while she had been—

Carl stood over her. Kara screamed.

It wasn’t Carl. It was a red luminosity wearing his body like a robe, lighting his skin from within, exposing his skeleton like a medical scan. His right arm was denuded to the blackened bones, right up to the place where the *Hinterlight*’s medicae had surgically reattached it.

‘Oh Throne! Oh Holy Throne!’ she cried, terrified. The glowing daemon began to reach its taloned hand out towards her.

‘Please, Carl! Please, don’t!’ she wailed.

The hand hesitated. The red glow inside Carl Thonius diminished for a moment. ‘Kara?’ he said, his voice sounding like it was coming from a long way off. ‘Oh, Kara, the stuff I know. I can see into your mind. You’re afraid of me. You’re afraid I’m going to kill you...’

Carl's eyelids fluttered. Shock and pain crossed his face. 'No, no... you're dying already! I can see it, that awful lump in your skull. Oh, Kara, no! Not you! Not like that!'

Suddenly, the fierce red glow swelled inside him again. His voice became a rasping growl. 'Let me make it better, Kara. Let me finish it quickly.'

The black talons swept towards her face.

OUTSIDE, I SAW the light change. It swirled darker, as if gallons of red ink or blood was mixing into it. The axial beams were now almost crimson. I felt the shudder of an enormous psychic force burst inside the collapsing sacristy.

'Back!' I cried. 'Get back all of you! *Do it!*'

The ground shook, as if an earthquake was striking. The immense light inside the sacristy went out, leaving nothing but the swirling fire. Every floodlight around the square blew apart in sprays of glass, and the windows of all the buildings around the grand templum shattered.

The dome of the sacristy ruptured and fell. Flames belched out of the doorways and window-holes. The force of the eruption threw my companions into the air and flung my chair backwards.

Crackling like forked lightning, the disconnected axial beams boiled out across the city of Petropolis. The nine hundred and ninety-nine temples and churches along Theodor Cadizky's fearful lines of godless symmetry detonated like bombs, destroying many buildings around them. Firestorms engulfed entire hab blocks and stacks. At the governor's palace, the monumental energy feedback incinerated the Encompass Room and engulfed the uppermost twenty floors of the tower in a gigantic fireball.

It blazed like the raw summit of an angry volcano, hurling white flames up into the blackness of the sky.



TEN

THOUSANDS DIED THAT night. Thousands of people, and some of them were innocent Imperial citizens, victims caught in the horror and the devastation. To most inhabitants of Eustis Majoris, it was an infamous disaster, a night of cataclysm. Most histories record it that way too.

Certainly the planet was plunged into civil chaos. Months of rioting and unrest followed, and spread throughout a subsector terrified that Imperial rule had been overturned. It led to civil wars, to famines, to plagues. Two decades later, the effects were still being felt.

I content myself with the knowledge that, even at so great a cost, it was a small price to pay. I know what might have been if that cabal of madmen and their ruthless secret keepers had managed to complete their pernicious ritual to acquire the power they craved.

Do not presume this means I am happy about the outcome. I deplore the destruction and the deaths. I console myself with the knowledge that every planet in the Imperium would have suffered the same or worse had Zygmunt Molotch achieved his apotheosis.

Martial law was imposed on Eustis Majoris. It took a year to return Petropolis to a state resembling order. In that time, the ordos intervened, led by my Lord Rorken himself. They purged, they cleaned, they excised the last taints of Jader Trice's corruption wherever it could be traced. Thousands more died, executed for heresy or complicity to that offence. Subsector governance was switched to Caxton for two terms, until a new lord governor subsector was found and elected under the supervision of the Inquisition.

Even before the Inquisitorial intervention arrived and took charge of the wounded world, I had departed, taking my battered and wounded warriors

with me. There was a final business to be dealt with, one that could not wait. Molotch, by Culzean's manipulative contrivance, had fled Eustis Majoris. We would not rest until we had hunted him down and destroyed him once and for all.

Medicae Belknap, perhaps the staunchest, truest soul I have ever met, urged me to stay and employ my influence and authority to restore control to the ravaged city. But that is not my area of expertise, and we were the only ones ready and able enough to begin an immediate pursuit of Molotch while he could still be traced. I would not allow him to remain free, or escape me once again. He had done that too many times already.

We left Eustis Majoris the day after the destruction of the sacristy, travelling aboard Master Unwerth's *Arethusa*.

Nayl, Patience and Unwerth himself were recovering from their injuries. Maud Plyton came with us, seconded to my service. I was happy to have her.

Zael remained in a coma. We transferred him to life support aboard the *Arethusa*. Frauka seldom left his side.

The one miracle in it all, of course, was Kara and Carl. We found them unconscious in the burning ruins of the old sacristy, with barely a scratch on either of them.

Somehow, perhaps by the divine providence of the God-Emperor himself, they had been spared in that final moment of catastrophe, as the ritual of Enunciation tore itself apart.



SOON

Aboard the Arethusa, in warp transit, 404.M41

‘IT’S STRANGE,’ SAID Belknap.

‘Good, though?’

The medicae nodded. ‘Of course. But I’ve never seen anything like it. The mass is just shrinking. Disappearing. Look, I’m going to the lab to check these results. Perhaps there’s a fault with Unwerth’s rickety old medical systems.’

‘I hope not,’ said Kara, sitting up on the infirmary cot.

‘So do I,’ he replied. ‘I’ll be back in five minutes.’

‘I’m glad you came with us,’ Kara said.

He looked back at her. ‘You’re my patient,’ he said. ‘I told you that I’d stay with you as long as you needed me.’

‘Right,’ she shrugged.

Belknap smiled and coughed. ‘What I meant to say was... I’m glad I came with you too.’

He left the infirmary. Kara lay back on the cot, breathed deeply, and closed her eyes.

‘Kara?’

She sat up with a start. Carl stood beside her bed.

‘Please...’ she began.

‘Kara,’ His eyes were wide and pleading. ‘I’m not going to hurt you.’

‘Please, Carl,’ she repeated. ‘I have to tell Gideon. I must. I really must.’

He reached out his hands, imploring. She shrank back, especially from the right hand.

‘Please, Kara,’ he begged. ‘If you tell Ravenor, it’ll all be over. I need more time, just a little more time. I can master this, understand it, learn to control it.’

‘No, Carl—’

‘Please, Kara! I’m not what you think I am! Would a warp daemon have fought against Molotch and destroyed his ritual? Would an evil man have saved you? Would an evil man have cured you?’

He touched the side of her head with the fingers of his right hand. She closed her eyes and shuddered.

‘I made you better,’ Carl Thonius whispered. ‘All I want is for you to help me to get better too. It’s not a lot to ask.’

He took his hand away and smiled. ‘There. I see it. You won’t tell. I know you won’t. You won’t tell them about...’ his voice trailed off.

‘The stuff you know,’ whispered Kara Swole.

PLAYING PATIENCE

A RAVENOR STORY

I

WEST OF URBITANE, the slum-tracts begin, and one descends into a ragged wilderness of dispiriting ruins where the only signs of life are the armoured manses of the narcobarons, projecting like metal blisters above the endless rubble. This is a destitute realm, a great and shameful urban waste, stalked by the Pennyraiders and the Dolours and a myriad other gangs, where Imperial authority has only the most tenuous grip.

A foetid wind blows through the slum-tracts, exhaled like bad breath from the sumps and stacks of the massive city. This miasmal air whines through the rotting habitats and moans in the shadows.

And those shadows are permanent, for the flanks of Urbitane rise behind the tracts, eclipsing all daylight. Flecked with a billion lamps, the rockcrete stacks of the sweating hive-city ascend into the roiling clouds like the angular shoulders of some behemoth emerging from chthonic depths, and soar as a sheer cliff above the slums that litter the lightless ground at its foot.

Sub-orbitals cross the murky sky, their trace-lights blinking like cursors on a dark screen. Occasionally the slums tremble as a bulk-lifter passes particularly low overhead on its final approach into the canyons of the hive, the bass rumble of its engines shivering the air.

Where, in the west, the hive stacks come tumbling down to meet the slums, shelving like giant staircases in bad repair, there is a patched stonework tower that houses the Kindred Youth Scholam. It is a meagre place, supported by charitable works, teetering on the brink between city

and slum. Humble, crumbling, it faces west, its many window-slits barred, for the safety of the pupils.

At the start of the year 396 Imperial, there were, amongst the scholam's many inhabitants, three sisters called Prudence, Providence and Patience.

The night I arrived on Sameter, the rigorists had locked Patience in the scholam's oubliette.

II

SAMETER IS A dismal place, and its morose air matched our mood. A slovenly, declining agrochemical world in the heartlands of the Helican subsector, it had seen better days.

So had we. My companions and I were weary and dejected. Pain clung to us like a shroud, so tightly none of us could express our grief. It had been that way for six months, since Majeskus. The only thing that kept us together and moved us along was a basic desire for revenge.

We had been forced to make the voyage to Sameter aboard a privately hired transport, the *Hinterlight* was dry-docked for repairs half a subsector away, and its mistress, Cynia Preest, had pledged to rejoin us as soon as the work was done. But I knew she was rueing the day she had ever agreed to assist my mission. When I had last spoken with her, she had confided, bitterly, that another incident like Majeskus would surely make her break her compact with me and return to the life of a merchant rogue in the Grand Banks.

She blamed me. They all blamed me, and they were damn well right. I had underestimated Molotch. I had given him the opening. My blind confidence had led to the disaster. Throne, what a fool I had been! Molotch was the sort of enemy one should never underestimate. He was Cognitae, perhaps the brightest and best to emerge from that infernal institution, which took genius as a basic prerequisite.

Our lander skimmed down through the filthy air above the Urbitane isthmus, bumping in the crosswind chop, and cycled in towards one of the

hive's private landing gantries on the north side of the city. As the breaking jets fired, sudden, intense gravity hung upon us. Even inside my suspensor field, I felt its weight. I had linked one of my chair's data cables to the lander's systems, and so saw everything that the shuttered cabin denied my friends. The looming piles of the hive, the shelf-like stacks, each one kilometres wide, the bristling lights, the smog. Hive towers rose up, as vast and impassive as tombstones, etched with lit windows. Chimneys exhaled skeins of black smoke. The lower airways buzzed with small fliers and ornithopters, like gnats swarming up on a summer evening. There, the spires of the Ecclesiarch Basilica, gilded like a crown; beyond, the huge glass roofs of the Northern Commercialia, so high that the clouds of a microclimate weather system had formed beneath their vault. There, the Inner Consul, the radiating rings of the transit system, the wrought-iron pavilions of the Agriculture Guild.

We touched down at sunset. Great, shimmering doughnuts of gas-flame were issuing from the promethium refineries along the isthmus, bellying up like small, fireball suns against the curdled brown undercast.

The private landing gantry was high up in the twisted mass of the inner hive-towers. Leased by the local ordos to provide convenient access to the city, it was a creaking metal platform trembled by the windshear. Even so, exhaust vapour from our dented, scabby lander pooled in an acrid haze inside the rusting safety basket of the pad. The lander, a gross-utility vehicle three hundred years old, reclined on its pneumatic landing claws like a tailless lizard. It had been painted red, a long time ago, but the colour was only a memory now. Steam hissed from the rapidly cooling hydraulics, and a disturbing quantity of lubricant and system fluid gushed out of its underside from joints and cracks and fissures.

Without asking, Kara Swole took hold of my chair's handle and pushed me out down the open ramp. I could have done it myself but I sensed that Kara, like all of them, wanted something to do, just to keep busy. Harlon Nayl followed us out, and walked to the edge of the safety cage to stare out into the foggy depths of the hive. Carl Thonius lingered in the hatchway,

paying the pilot his fee and tip and making arrangements for future services. Harlon and Kara were both dressed in bodygloves and heavy jackets, but Carl Thonius was, as ever, clad in exquisite, fashionable garments: buckled wedge shoes, black velvet pantaloons, a tailored jacket of grey damask tight around his thin ribs, a high collar tied with a silk bow and set with a golden pin. He was twenty-four years old, blond-haired, rather plain of face, but striking in his poise and manners. I had thought him too much of a dandy when the ordos first submitted him as a possible interrogator, but had quickly realised that behind the foppish, mannered exterior lay a quite brilliant analytical mind. His rank marked him out amongst my retainers. The others – Nayl and Kara, for example – were individuals I hired because of their skills and talents. But Carl was an inquisitor in training. One day, he would aspire to the office and signet of the sublime ordos. His service to me, as interrogator, was his apprenticeship, and every inquisitor took on at least one interrogator, training them for the duty ahead. I had been Gregor Eisenhorn's interrogator, and had learned an immeasurable amount from that great man. I had no doubt that, in a few years, Carl Thonius would be well on his way to that distinguished rank.

Of course, for reasons I could not have ever imagined, that would not be the case. Hindsight is a worthless toy.

Wystan Frauka emerged from the lander, lighting his latest lho-stick from the stub of the last. He had his limiter turned on, of course, and it would remain on until I told him otherwise. He looked bored, as usual, detached. He wandered over to where a servitor was unloading our luggage from the lander's aft belly-hatch and looked for his own belongings.

Harlon remained at the edge of the safety cage, deep in thought. A heavysset man, thick with corded muscle, his head shaved, he had a dominating presence. Born on Loki, he'd been a bounty-hunter for many years before gaining employment with my mentor Eisenhorn because of his skills. I had inherited him, so to speak. There was no man I would rather have at my side in a fight. But I wondered if Harlon Nayl *was* at my

side any more. Not since... the event. I'd heard him talk about 'going back to the old game', his defeated tone the same as Cynia Preest's. If it came down to it, I would let him go.

But I would miss him.

Kara Swole trundled me over to the gantry edge until we were facing the safety basket too. We stared out across the city.

'See anything you like?' she asked. She was trying to be light and funny, but I could taste the pain in her voice.

'We'll find something here, I promise.' I said, my voice synthesised, expressionless, through the mechanical vox-ponder built into my support chair. I hadn't mind-talked to any of them for a long time now, not since Majeskus, probably. I despised the vox-ponder's menacing flatness, but telepathy seemed too intimate, too intrusive at a time when thoughts were raw and private.

'We'll find something here.' I repeated. 'Something worth finding.'

Kara managed a smile. It was the first I had seen her shape for months, and it warmed me briefly. She was trying. Kara Swole was a short, voluptuous redhead whose rounded build quite belied her acrobatic abilities. Like Harlon, I had inherited her from Eisenhorn. She was a true servant of the ordos, as hard as stone when she needed to be, but she possessed a gentleness as appealing and soft as her curves. For all her dexterity, her stealth, her confidence with weapons, I think it was that gentleness that I most valued her for.

Molotch had faded into the void after his crimes above Majeskus, leaving no trace. Sameter, benighted planet, offered us the vestige of a clue. Three of Molotch's hired guns, three of the men we had slain in the battle on the *Hinterlight*, had proved, under forensic examination, to have come from Sameter. From this very place, Urbitane, the planet's second city.

We would find their origins and their connections, and follow them through every tenuous twitch and turn, until we had Molotch's scent again.

And then...

Carl had finished his transactions with the lander pilot. As I turned, I saw the pilot looking at me, staring at me the same way he and the other crew members had stared since they had first seen me come aboard. I didn't have to reach out with my mind to understand his curiosity.

The wounds of Chaos had left me a mangled wreck, a disembodied soul locked forever within a grav-suspended, armoured support chair. I had no physical identity anymore. I was just a lump of floating metal, a mechanical container, inside which a fragment of organic material remained, kept vital and pulsing by complex bio-systems. I knew the very sight of me scared people, people like the pilot and the rest of his crew. I had no face to read, and people do so like a face.

I missed my face. I missed my limbs. Destiny had left me one virtue, my mind. Powerfully, alarmingly psychic, my mind was my one saving grace. It allowed me to carry on my work. It allowed me to transcend my pitiful state as a cripple in a metal box.

Molotch had a face. A handsome visor of flesh that was, in its way, as impassive as my sleek, matt-finished metal. The only expression it ever conveyed was a delight in cruelty. I would take great pleasure in burning it off his shattered skull.

'Do we have the names and physiologues?' I asked.

'Nayl's got them.' Kara replied.

'Harlon?'

He turned and walked over to join us, pulling a dataslate from the hip-pocket of his long, mesh-weave coat.

He flipped it on.

'Victor Zhan. Noble Soto. Goodman Frell. Biogs, traces, taints and histories. All present and correct.'

'Let's do what we came here to do.' I said.

III

OUBLIETTE. A PLACE where things or persons are put so that they may be forgotten about. Or, as Patience preferred to think, a place where one might sit awhile and forget.

The scholam's oubliette was a cavity under the lower hall, fitted with a bolted hatch. There was no light, and vermin scuttled around in the wet shadows. It was the punishment place, the area where those pupils who had committed the worst infractions were sent by the rigorists. But it was also one of the few places in the Kindred Youth Scholam where a pupil could enjoy some kind of privacy.

According to its register, the scholam was home to nine hundred and seventy-six young people, most of them slum orphans. There were thirty-two tutors, all privately employed, and another forty servants and ancillary staff, including a dozen men, all ex-Guard, known as the *rigorists*, whose duties were security and discipline.

Life in the scholam was austere. The old tower, built centuries earlier for some purpose no one could now remember, was chilly and damp. The tower itself clung for support to the side of a neighbouring stack, like a climbing plant against a wall. The floors of its many storeys were cold ouslite dressed with rush-fibre, the walls lime-washed and prone to trickles of condensation. A murmur from the lower levels reminded the inhabitants that there was a furnace plant working down there, but it was the only clue, for no heat ever issued from the thumping pipework or the corroded radiators.

The regime was strict. An early rise, prayers, and an hour of ritual examination before breakfast, which was taken at sunrise. The morning was spent performing the many chores of the scholam – scrubbing floors, washing laundry, helping in the kitchen – and the afternoon was filled with academic classes. After supper, more prayers, ablutions in the freezing wash-house, and then two hours of liturgical study by lamplight.

Occasionally, trusted older pupils were allowed to accompany tutors out of the tower on trips into the nearby regions of the hive, to help carry purchased food stocks, fabrics, ink, oil and all the other sundry materials

necessary to keep the scholam running. They were a distinctive sight in the busy streets of the western stacks: a grim, robed tutor leading a silent, obedient train of uniformed scholars, each one laden down by bundles, bales, bags and cartons. Every pupil wore a uniform, a unisex design in drab grey with the initials of the scholam stitched onto the back.

Few pupils ever complained about the slender comfort of their lives, because almost all of them had volunteered for it. Strict it might be, but life in the Kindred Youth Scholam was preferable to the alternative outside in the tracts. Existence in the wastelands west of the hive offered a lean choice: scavenge like an animal, or bond into a gang. Either way, life expectancy was miserably low. Municipally-sponsored scholams, offering a bed, food and a basic education that emphasised the values of the Throne, represented an escape route. Reasonably healthy, lice-free, qualified youngsters could leave such institutions with a real prospect of securing an apprenticeship to one of the hive guilds, a journeyship, or at least a decent indenture.

Patience had been at the scholam for twelve years, which meant she was twenty-two or twenty-three years old and by far the oldest pupil registered at that time. Most pupils left the care of the charity around their majority, when their age gave them a legal identity in the eyes of the guilds. But Patience had stayed on because of her sisters. Twins, Providence and Prudence were fifteen, and Patience had promised them she would stay and look after them until they turned eighteen. It was a promise she'd made to her sisters, and to her dying mother, the day their mother had brought the three of them to the scholam and asked the tutors to take them in.

Patience was not her birth name, no more than Prudence's was Prudence or Providence's Providence. They were scholam names, given to each pupil at their induction, symbolic of the fresh start they were making.

Except for Patience, few pupils were made to suffer the oubliette. She had now been in there nineteen times.

On this occasion, she was in for breaking the nose of Tutor Abelard. She'd punched the odious creep for criticising her work in the laundry. The crack of cartilage and the puff of blood had been very satisfying.

Cooling down, in the dark, Patience recognised that it had been foolish to strike the tutor. Just another mark against her record. For this, she was missing the graduation supper taking place in the vaults many floors up. There was an event like it every few months, when distinguished men of consequence – guild masters, merchants, manufactory directors and mill owners – came to the scholam to meet and examine the older pupils, making selections from the best and contracting apprenticeships. By morning, Patience knew, many of her long-term friends would have left the scholam forever to begin new lives in the teeming stacks of Urbitane.

The fact was, she'd been there too long. She was too old to be contained by the scholam, even by the hardline rigorists, and that was why she kept running into trouble. If it hadn't been for her promise, and her two, beloved sisters, she'd have been apprenticed to a hive mill long since.

Something bristly and locomoting on more than four legs scuttled across her bare hand. With a twitch of her gift, she hurled it away into the dark.

Her gift. Only she had it. Her sisters showed no sign of it. Patience never used her gift in front of the tutors, and she was fairly certain they knew nothing about it.

It was a mind thing. She could move things by thinking about them. She'd discovered she could do it the day her mother left them at the scholam gates. Patience had been practising ever since.

In the dark of the black stone cell, Patience tried to picture her mother's face, but couldn't. She could remember a warm smell, slightly unwashed but reassuring, a strong embrace, a hacking cough that presaged mortality.

The face, though, the face...

It had been a long time. Unable to form the image in her head, Patience turned her mind to something else. Her name. Not Patience. Her real name. The tutors had tried to rid her of it, forcing her to change her

identity, but she still hung on to it. It was the one private piece of her that nothing and no one could ever steal. Her true name.

It kept her alive. The very thought of it kept her going.

The irony was, she could leave the oubliette whenever she chose. A simple flick of her gift would throw back the bolt and allow her to lift the trapdoor. But that would give her away, convince the tutors she was abnormal.

Patience reined her mind in and sat still in the darkness.

Someone was coming. Coming to let her out.

IV

HARLON NAYL'S EYES didn't so much as blink as the fist came at him. His left hand went out, tilting inwards, captured the man's arm neatly around the inside of the wrist, and wrenched it right round through two hundred degrees. A bone may have snapped, but if it did, the sound was masked by the man's strangled squeal, a noise which ended suddenly as Nayl's other hand connected with his face.

The man – a thickset lhotus-eater with a mucus problem – shivered the deck as he hit it. Nayl kept hold of his wrist, pulling the man's arm straight and tight while he stood firmly on his armpit. This position allowed for significant leverage, and Nayl made use of it. Harlon was in a take-no-prisoners mood, I sensed, which was hardly useful given our objective.

A little leverage and rotation. A ghastly scream, vocalised through a face spattered with blood.

'What do you reckon?' asked Nayl, twisting a little more and increasing the pitch. 'Do you think I can get top ? out of him?'

'Should I care?' replied Morpal Who Moves with mannered disinterest. 'You can twist Manx's arm right off and beat him round the head with it, he still won't tell you what you want. He's a lho-brow. He knows nothing.'

Nayl smiled, twisted, got another shriek. 'Of course he is. I worked that much out from his scintillating conversation. But one of you does. One of

you knows the answer I want. Sooner or later his screams will aggravate you so much you'll tell me.'

Morpal Who Moves had a face like a crushed walnut. He sat back in his satin-upholstered buoy-chair and fiddled with a golden rind-shrivel, a delicate tool that glittered between his bony fingers. He was weighing up what to say. I could read the alternatives in his forebrain like the label on a jar.

'This is not good for business—'

'Sir, this is my place of business, and I don't take kindly to—'

'Throne of Earth, who the frig d'you think you are—'

Morpal's place was a four-hectare loading dock of iron, stock-brick and timber hinged out over the vast canyon gulf of the West Descent, an aerial thoroughfare formed by the gap between two of the hive's most colossal stacks. Beneath the reinforced platform and the gothic buttresses that supported it, space dropped away for almost a vertical kilometre to the base of the stacks. Ostensibly, this was a ledge where cargo-flitters and load-transporters – and many thousands of these craft plied the airways of the West Descent – could drop in for repairs, fuel, or whatever else the pilots needed. But Morpal was a fence and racketeer, and the transience of the dock's traffic gave him ample opportunity to steal, replace, backhand, smuggle and otherwise run his lucrative trade.

More than twenty men stood in a loose group around Harlon. Most were stevedores and dock labourers in Morpal's employ. The others were flit-pilots, gig-men, hoy-drivers and riggers who'd stopped in for caffeine, fuel and a game of cards, many of them regulars who were into Morpal for more than a year's salary each.

All this and more was visible from their collective thoughts, which swirled around the loading dock like a fog. I was five kilometres away, in a room in a low-rent hotel. But it was all clear enough. I knew what Mingus Futir had eaten for breakfast, what Fancyman D'cree had stolen the night before, the lie Gert Gerity had told his wife. I knew all about the thing Erik Klass didn't want to tell Morpal.

Wystan Frauka sat beside me, smoking a lho-stick, his limiter activated. He was reading a tremendously tedious erotic novel on his slate.

Surface was easy. Deep mind was harder. Morpal Who Moves and his cronies were well-used to concealing their secrets.

That was why Harlon had gone in first.

Morpall finally arrived at a decision. He had determined, I sensed, to take the moral high ground. 'This is not how things are done on my platform.' he told Harlon. 'This is a respectable establishment.'

'Yeah, right.' snorted Nayl. 'One last time. What can you tell me about Victor Zhan? He worked here once, before he went off planet. I know he worked here, because I had the records checked out. So tell me about Victor.'

'Victor Zahn hasn't been around in five years.' Morpal said.

'Tell me about him anyway.' Nayl snapped.

'I really don't see any reason to do that.'

'I'll show you one.' Nayl reached his free hand into his hip pocket, took something out and threw it down onto the cup-ringed, grimy tabletop. His badge of authority. The signet crest of the Inquisition.

Immediately all the men took a step back, alarmed. I felt Morpal's mind start in dismay. This was the kind of trouble no one wanted.

Unless...

'Damn it.' I said.

Frauka looked up from the midst of his book's latest loveless tryst. 'What's up?'

'Morpall Who Moves is about to make a miscalculation.'

'Oh dear.' said Frauka, and turned back to his novel.

Morpall had run the dock for forty-six years. For all his misdeeds and misdemeanours, some of them serious, he'd never run foul of the law, apart from the odd fine or reprimand. He actually thought he could deal with this and get away with it.

+Harlon. Morpal's signal will be a double finger-click. Your immediate threat is the grey-haired gig-man to your left, who has a dart-knife. To his right, in the leather apron, the rigger has a pivot-gun, but he will not be able to draw it as fast. The flit-pilot in green wants to prove himself to Morpal, and he won't hesitate. His friend, the one with the obscura-tinted eyes, is less confident, but he has a boomgun in his cab.+

'Well?' Harlon Nayl asked.

Morpai Who Moves clicked both middle fingers.

I flinched at the sudden flare of adrenaline and aggression. A great part of it came from Nayl.

The rigger in the leather apron had drawn his pivot-gun, but Nayl had already stoved the table in with the face of the grey-haired gig-man and relieved him of his dart-knife. Nayl threw himself around as the pilot in green lunged forward, and slam-kicked him in the throat. The pilot went down, choking, his larynx crushed, as the pivot-gun finally boomed. The home-made round whipped high over Nayl's head as he rolled and triggered the dart-knife. The spring-propelled blade speared the rigger through the centre of his leather apron, and he fell over on his back, clawing at his belly.

Others ploughed in, one striking Nayl in the ribs with an eight wrench.

'Ow!' Nayl grunted, and laid the man out. The obscura fiend was running across the platform towards his hoy. Nayl threw another man aside, and grabbed the edges of Morpal's buoy-chair. The Mover yelled in dismay as Nayl slung the frictionless chair sideways. It sped across the platform like a quoit, knocking two of the stevedores over, and slammed hard against the dock's restraining rail. The serious impact dazed Morpal. He slumped forward.

Nayl backfisted a man in the nose, and then punched out another who was trying to flee anyway. Two front teeth flew into the air. The obscura fiend had his hoy's door open, reaching in.

A stevedore with a hatchet swung at Nayl, forcing him to jump back. Nayl blocked the next swing with his forearm, fractured the man's sternum

with a jab, and threw him with a crash into the nearby row of porcelain samovars.

The obscura addict turned from his cab and racked the grip of his boomgun. He brought it up to fire.

Nayl slid the Hecuter 10 from his bodyglove and calmly shot him through the head at fifteen metres.

Blood splashed up the rusted fender of the hoy. The man cannoned backwards, dropping the boomgun from dead fingers.

The rest of them scattered.

Kara ran onto the platform, her weapon raised. It had taken her just thirty seconds to move out of cover at my command to back up Nayl, but the fight was already done.

‘Don’t leave any for me, then,’ she complained.

‘You should have been here.’ Nayl said. He walked over to the rig and picked up the fallen boomgun, examining it.

‘Nice.’ he said.

+Harlon...+

Nayl looked over at Morpal, who was just coming round, the back of his buoy-chair rammed against the platform’s rail. He saw Nayl, saw him aiming the weapon...

+Harlon! No!+

But Nayl’s blood was up. The need for vengeance, suppressed for so long, was finally finding an outlet.

Nayl fired. Morpal had ducked. The shot exploded the seat-back above him, and the rail behind. The force of the impact drove the buoy-chair backwards.

Intact, unscathed, but still sitting in his chair, Morpal Who Moves went backwards, toppled, and fell into the inter-stack gulf.

‘Well, damn.’ Nayl hissed.

+For Throne’s sake, Nayl! I told you not to—+

Thonius had just walked into the hotel room behind me.

‘Good book?’ he asked Frauka.

‘Saucy.’ Frauka replied, not looking up.

+Nayl’s just ruined our lead.+

‘Never mind.’ Thonius grinned, a smug satisfaction on his face. ‘It was pointless anyway. I’ve found a much better one.’

V

SHE KNEW FOR certain it was Rigorist Knill even before he opened the oubliette hatch. Just part of her gift, the same thing that allowed her to win at cards or guess which hand a coin was in.

‘Come, you.’ he said. A glow-globe coded to Knill’s bio-trace bobbed at his shoulder and cast its cheap yellow light into the cell.

Patience got up and stepped out into the hallway, making a big show of dusting down her garments.

‘They’ll be dirtier yet.’ Knill remarked, closing the heavy, black iron door. ‘The dinner’s over, and the Prefect wants the pots doing.’ Knill chuckled and pushed her on down the hallway. The glowglobe followed obediently.

There was little to like about Rigorist Knill. In his days as an Imperial Guardsman, he had been big and powerful, but age and a lack of exercise had sunk his muscles into slabby fat, hunching him over. His teeth were black pegs, and a scarred, concave section of his skull explained both the end of his soldiering career and his simpleton’s nature. Knill was proud of his past, and still wore his medal on his chest. He liked to regale the pupils with accounts of the glorious actions he had seen, and got angry when they mocked him and pointed out inconsistencies in his stories. But he wasn’t the worst by a long way. Skinny Rigorist Souzerin had such a short temper and love of the flail that the pupils believed he had once been a commissar. Rigorist Ocell was rather too fond of the younger girls. And then there was Rigorist Ide, of course.

‘So I’m to wash pots?’ Patience asked.

‘Get on.’ Knill grumbled, and gave her a cuff. Like all the rigorists, Knill wore a knotted leather flail and a longer wooden baton suspended from his wide leather belt. The flail was for minor punishments, the baton a more serious disciplinary tool. Knill, who trusted his fists, seldom used either. Many of Prefect Cyrus’s long morning sermons revolved around the symbology of the rigorists’ twin instruments, likening them to the paired heads of the holy aquila, voices of different pitch and measure through which the dogmas of the Golden Throne might be communicated in complementary ways. In the Kindred Youth Scholam, most lessons seemed to require some corporal component.

They ascended the draughty stone stairs, and passed through the unlit lesson halls of the seventh remove. The narrow hallways between classrooms were formed by partly-glazed wooden partitions. The glass in the frames was stained the colour of tobacco by the passage of the years.

Then Knill unlocked the door to the next ascent.

‘I thought I was wanted for scullion duties.’ Patience said.

‘The Prefect would clap eyes on you first,’ replied Knill, and jerked his head upwards.

Patience sighed, and began to trudge up the winding stairs ahead of Knill’s light. She knew what that meant. A quiz from the Prefect on the error of her ways. If she was lucky, she’d get away with an apology to Tutor Abelard, and a few *Lachrymose Mea* in the chapel under the Prefect’s instruction before she spent the night in the potroom, freezing her hands in the greasy sop-tubs.

If she was unlucky, there would be Souzerin and his flail. Or Ide.

It took them over twenty minutes to climb the meandering tower to the upper vaults. In the main chamber there, servants and a few chosen pupils were clearing the last dregs of the feast. The air was still warm, and scented with rich cooking smells. Prefect Cyrus did not stint when important visitors came to the scholam. He even provided wine and amasec, and did not complain when manufactory directors lit up pipes and lho-sticks. Patience could smell the spicy smoke lingering in the long

room. Two young pupils from the sixth remove were team-folding the white cloths from the feast tables. A tutor, Runciman, was supervising them, and explaining the geometry of the correct fold-angles.

‘Wait,’ Knill told her, and left her in the doorway. He shambled off down the length of the long, beamed hall, his light tagging along after him like a willowisp. Patience waited, edgy, arms folded. Three young children ran out past her, their arms full of candlesticks, napkin rings threaded around their tiny wrists. One glanced up at her, eyes wide.

Knill reached the far end of the room. Prefect Cyrus was sitting at the high table still, a swell-glass in his hand, talking quietly with a stranger in a dark red robe. One of the night’s visitors, a guildier or a mill owner perhaps. Clearly a man of wealth and breeding, well-groomed. He was listening to the Prefect intently, sipping something from a tall crystal beaker. To his left, apart from the conversation, sat another man, another stranger. This man was short, but powerfully made, his cropped hair ginger in the lamplight, his bodyglove traced with silver. He was smoking a lho-stick, and gazing with half-interest at the ancient, flaking murals on the chamber walls. From her vantage point, Patience could see the ginger-haired man wore an empty holster on his hip. Prefect Cyrus did not permit firearms inside the scholam, but that holster suggested the ginger-haired man was a bodyguard, a paid protector. The man in red was evidently even more important than she had first suspected, if he could afford his own muscle.

Then Patience saw Ide. The rigorist was standing at the far end of the chamber, waiting. He was staring right at her. She shuddered. Tall, strong, Ide was a brute. His eyes were always half-open, and he wore his white-blond hair in a long, shaggy mane, secured at the nape by a silver buckle. Ide was the only rigorist who never bragged about his Guard days. Patience had a nasty idea why.

Knill spoke briefly to the prefect, who excused himself to the man in red, and walked down to the centre of the hall, Knill at his heels. The Prefect

gestured that Patience should come join him. She approached obediently, until they were face to face.

Prefect Cyrus was anything between forty and four hundred. Slim and well-made, he had undergone many programs of juvenat work, making his flesh over-tight and his skin hideously smooth and pink. His eyes were violet and, Patience believed, deliberately sculpted by the aug-chemists to appear kind and fatherly. His blue robes were perfectly pressed and starched. When he smiled, his implanted teeth were as white as ice.

He was smiling now.

‘Patience.’ he whispered. She could smell the oil of cloves he wore to scent his body.

‘My Prefect.’ she answered with effort.

‘You flinch. Why do you flinch?’

She could not say it was because Rigorist Ide had just taken the first few steps on his way to join them. ‘I broke the rules, and committed an affront to the person of Tutor Abelard. I flinch as I await my punishment.’

‘Patience.’ the Prefect said. ‘Your punishment is over. You’ve been set in the oubliette, have you not?’ He looked round at Knill. ‘She has been in the oubliette all night, hasn’t she, Knill?’

‘That is so, Prefect.’ replied Knill with a nod.

‘All done, then. No need to flinch.’

‘Then why am I here?’ Patience asked.

‘I have good news.’ the prefect said, ‘and I wanted to share it with you as soon as possible. Good, good news, that I’m sure will lift your heart as surely as it has lifted mine.’

‘What is it?’

‘Patience, places have been secured this night for your dear sisters. Serving in the hall this evening, they so won the admiration of a merchant lord, one of our guests, he offered them indenture on the spot.’

Patience blinked. ‘My sisters?’

‘Have taken wing at last, Patience. Their particulars are all signed and contracted. Their new life has already begun.’

‘No. That’s not right.’ Patience said sharply. ‘They’re too young. They haven’t yet reached majority. I won’t allow it.’

‘It is already done,’ the Prefect said, his face showing no sign of annoyance.

‘Then undo it.’ Patience said. ‘Right now! Undo it! I should’ve been consulted! They are in my charge!’

‘Patience, you were detained in the oubliette, for your own wrongdoings. I decided the matter. Your sisters are already long departed, and I trust you will wish them well in your prayers this night.’

‘No!’ she shouted.

‘Shut your hole!’ warned Knill, stepping forward, his light bobbing after him.

‘No need for that, Knill.’ said Cyrus. The Prefect gazed at Patience. ‘I am rather surprised by your response, Patience. I had thought you would be pleased.’

She glowered at him. ‘You cheated me. You knew I wasn’t around to object. This is wrong! They are too young—’

‘I tire of this, Patience. There is no rule or law that says girls of your sisters’ age may not be contracted. Such an agreement is in my power.’

‘It isn’t! You can only authorise a contract of employ in the case of an orphan lacking the appropriate blood-kin! That’s the law! I’ve only stayed here this long to supervise their well-being! You bastard!’

‘Take her away, Knill.’ said the Prefect.

‘Don’t even think about it, Knill.’ Patience warned. ‘I want his name, Cyrus. The name of this man who has taken my sisters.’

‘Oh, and for what good?’

‘I am of majority. I can leave this stinking tower whenever I choose. Give me the name... now! I will find him and secure the release of my sisters!’

Prefect Cyrus turned to Knill. ‘Another period in the oubliette, I feel.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Oh, no.’ said Patience, backing away. ‘You can’t touch me now. Not now. I’ve stuck by the scholam’s frigging rules this long, one way or another, for the good of my sisters, but you have no hold on me! I am an adult, with the rights of an adult! Go frig yourself, Cyrus, I’m leaving!’

‘Double the period for that vile language!’ Cyrus barked.

‘Double this, stink-breath!’ Patience cried, making a gesture one of the pot-boys had taught her.

Knill lunged at her, arms wide. She ducked sideways, putting a little of her gift into the kick she slammed at the old soldier’s belly. Knill lurched away and crashed into a table, knocking pewterware onto the floor, anxiously steadying himself against the table’s edge in surprise.

Somehow, Ide had got behind her. The blow from his baton, swung two-handed, caught her across the back of the skull and dropped her to her hands and knees. Patience blacked out for a brief moment, and blood streamed out down her nose onto the flagstones. She felt Ide’s big hand crush her left shoulder as it grabbed her.

‘Never did live up to your name.’ she heard Ide murmur.

Her name. Her *name*. Not Patience. The one little piece of her life she still owned entirely.

Ide was swinging the baton down again to smack her shoulders. She froze his hand. Ide gasped, sweating, terrified, as an invisible force slowly pulled his powerful arm back and drew the baton away from her. She let it smash Ide in the face.

He staggered back with an anguished cry, blood spurting from his mangled nose. Then she was up, on her feet, flicking her head back hard so that the blood from her nose splattered out in a shower. Knill was coming for her. So was the Prefect. Someone was crying an alarm.

Patience looked at Knill and he flew backwards through the air, slamming into the table again so hard it went over with him. She looked at Cyrus, and snarled as she simultaneously burst all the blood-vessels in his face. He fell down on his knees, whimpering.

‘You bastards!’ she was screaming. ‘My sisters, you bastards!’

Ide swung at her again. He was crazy-mad now, trying to kill her. Patience held out a hand and Ide went sprawling over on his back... and continued to slide down the length of the hallway until his skull crashed into the stone doorpost.

Rigorist Souzerin had appeared from somewhere, his flail raised as he ran at her. Knill was clambering to his feet.

Patience ducked Souzerin’s first slash, then hurled him backwards a few steps with a twitch of her mind. She was getting tired now. Knill thundered forward.

‘I’ll take that.’ Patience said, and ripped the medal from Knill’s tunic with a mental flick. She slapped her outspread palms against Knill’s dented skull and blasted him away into the murals. The ancient plasterwork cracked under the heavy impact and Knill fell limp onto the floor.

Souzerin came in again. Knill’s medal was still hanging in the air. Patience whipped it around and buried it in Souzerin’s cheek. He fell down with a wail of pain, blood pouring from the long gouge.

‘I’ve seen enough.’ said the man in the red robe.

The ginger-haired man rose to his feet and turned off his limiter.

Patience shrieked as her gift went away completely. It was as if her strength had been shut off. A hard vacuum formed and popped in her soul. She had never met an untouchable before.

Staggering, she turned. The ginger-haired man came towards her, his hands open and loose.

‘Let’s go, darling.’ he said.

She threw a punch at him. She felt so weak.

He caught it, and hit her in the face.

The blow seemed effortless, but she fell hard, barely conscious. The ginger-haired man leaned over and pinched a nerve point that left her paralysed.

Blind, helpless, she heard Prefect Cyrus being helped back onto his feet.

‘You were right, Cyrus,’ she heard the man in red say. ‘An excellent subject. An unformed telekine. The gamers will pay well for this. I have no objection to meeting your price of ten thousand.’

‘Agreed, Loketter,’ the Prefect sniffed. ‘Just... just get her out of my sight.’

VI

CARL THONIUS WAS patently pleased with himself. ‘Consider the names again. Victor Zhan. Noble Soto. Goodman Frell. The forenames are all names, yes, but they’re also all simple, virtuous. The sort of solid, strong, aspirational names a highborn master, for example, might give to his slaves.’

‘These men were slaves?’ Kara asked.

‘Not exactly.’ said Carl. ‘But I think they’re all *given* names. Not birth names.’

Carl had a particular talent in the use of cogitators and logic engines. Since our arrival, he had spent many hours in the census archives of Urbitane. ‘I’ve been tracing the file records of all three men. It’s laborious work, and the records are, no tittering at the back, incomplete. The names are officially logged and genuine, but they are not connected to any local bloodlines. Soto, Zhan and Frell are all common names here on Sameter, but there is no link between any of these men and any family or families carrying those names. In other words, I believe they chose the surnames themselves. They chose common local surnames.’

‘Fake identities.’ Nayl shrugged. ‘Not much of a lead then.’

‘Says the man who pushed our last decent lead off a kilometre high ledge.’ Carl mocked. Nayl gave him a threatening look, and the interrogator shrugged. ‘No, not fake identities. The evidence points to the fact that all three men were orphans, probably from the slums. They were raised in a poorhouse or maybe a charitable institution, where they were

given their virtuous forenames. On leaving the poorhouse, as young adults, they were obliged to choose and adopt surnames so that they could be registered on the citizenry roll and be legally recognised.'

'Odd that he employed three men with the same background.' Kara said. She could not bring herself to utter Molotch's name.

'Curious indeed.' I agreed. 'Carl, I don't suppose you managed to identify the institutions that raised them?'

'Throne, you don't want much do you?' Carl laughed. He beamed, like a conjuror showing off a sleight-of-hand marvel. 'Of course I did. And they all came from the same one. A darling little place called the Kindred Youth Scholam.'

Nayl left the hotel room almost immediately and headed off to scare up some transport for us. For the first time in months, I felt my team moving with a sense of focus, so refreshingly different from the blunt-edged vengeance that had spurred them since Majeskus. Carl deserved praise. He had diligently uncovered a trail that gave us refined purpose once again.

We had been so squarely and murderously outplayed by the heretic Zygmunt Molotch. I had been pursuing him for a long time, but at Majeskus, he stopped running and turned to face me.

The ensuing clash, most of which took place aboard my chartered starship, The *Hinterlight*, left over half the crew dead. Amongst them, trapped by Molotch's malicious evil, were three of my oldest, most trusted retainers: Will Tallowhand, Norah Santjack and Eleena Koi. Badged with their blood, triumphant, the bastard Molotch had escaped.

I had lost friends before. We all had. Serving the ordos of the Holy Inquisition was a dangerous and often violent calling. I myself, more than most, can vouch for the cost to life and limb.

But Majeskus was somehow a particularly searing blow. Molotch's assault had been ingeniously vicious and astoundingly callous, even by the standards of such vermin. It was as if he had a special genius for spite. I had vowed not to rest until I had found him again and exacted retribution in full.

In truth, when I came to Sameter, I do not think I was an Imperial inquisitor at all. I am not ashamed to admit that for a brief while, my duty to the God-Emperor had retreated somewhat, replaced by a more personal fire. I was Gideon Ravenor, burning to avenge his friends.

The same, I knew, was true of my four companions. Harlon and Kara had known Eleena Koi since their days together in the employ of my former master Eisenhorn. Harlon had also formed a particular bond of friendship with the mercurial Will Tallowhand. In Norah Santjack, Thonius had enjoyed the stimulating company of a mind as quick and clever as his own. There would be no more devilish games of regicide, no more late-night debates on the respective merits of the later Helican poets. And Thonius was yet young. These were the first comrades he had lost in the line of duty.

Even Wistan Frauka was in mourning. Louche and taciturn, Frauka was an unloved, unlovely man who made no friends because of his untouchable curse. But Eleena Koi had been an untouchable too, one of nature's rare psychic blanks and the last of Eisenhorn's Distaff. There had been a relationship there, one neither of them ever chose to disclose, presumably a mutual need created by their shared status as outsiders, pariahs. He missed her. In the weeks after Majeskus, he said less than usual, and smoked all the time, gazing into distances and shadows.

Aboard the hired transport – a small, grey cargo-gig with whistling fancell engines – we moved west through the hive-city. Carl linked his dataslate to my chair's input and I reviewed his information concerning the scholam.

It had been running for many years, ostensibly a worthy charity school straggling to provide housing and basic levels of education for the most neglected section of Urbitane's demographic. There were millions, nay billions, of institutions like it all across the Imperium, wherever hives rose and gross poverty loomed. Many were ran by the Ecclesiarchy, or tied to some scheme of work by the Departamento Munitorum or the Imperial Guard itself. Some were missionary endeavours established by zealous

social reformers, some political initiatives, some just good, four-square community efforts to assist the downtrodden and underprivileged.

And some were none of those things. Carl and I inspected the records of the Kindred Youth Scholam carefully. On the surface, it was respectable enough. Its register audits were a matter of public record, and it applied for and received the right grants and welfare support annually, which meant that the Administratum subjected it to regular inspection. It was approved by the Munitorum, and held all the appropriate stamps and marques of a legitimate charitable institution. It had an impressive portfolio of recommendations and references from many of Urbitane's worthies and nobles. It had even won several rosettes of distinction from the Missionaria.

But scratch any surface...

'You'll like this,' said Carl. 'The Prefect, he's one Berto Cyrus. His official file is spotless and perfectly in order. But I think it's a graft.'

A graft. A legitimate dossier that has been expertly designed to overfit previous records and eclipse them. Done well – and this had been done brilliantly – a graft would be more than adequate to bypass the Administratum. But we servants of the holy ordos had greater and more refined tools of scrutiny to bring to bear. Carl showed me the loose ends and rough edges that had been tucked away to conceal the basic deception, the long, tortuous strands of inconsistency that no one but the Inquisition would ever think to check, for the effort would be too labour-intensive. That was ever the failing of the Imperium's monumental Administratum. Overseeing hives the size of Urbitane, even an efficient and ordered division of the Administratum could only hope to keep up with day to day processing. There was no time for deeper insight. If one wanted to hide something from the Imperial Administratum, one simply had to place it at the end of a long line of diversions and feints, so far removed from basic inspections that no Administery clerk would ever notice it.

'He's older than he pretends to be,' said Carl. 'Far older. Here's the giveaway. Three digits different in his twelve digit citizenry numeric, but

changed here, at birth-registry date, where no one would ever go back to look. Berto Cyrus was actually a stillborn infant. The Prefect took over the identity.'

'Which makes him?'

'Which makes him eighty-eight years older than his record states. And therefore makes him, in fact, Ludovic Kyro, a cognitae-schooled heretic wanted on five worlds.'

'Cognitae? Throne of Earth!'

'I said you'd like it,' Carl smiled, 'and here's the other thing. Its implications are not very pleasant.'

'Go on.'

'Given the scholam's throughput of pupils over the years, very, very few are still evident in the city records.'

'They've disappeared?'

'That's too strong a word. *Not accounted for* would be a better term. The ex-pupils have dropped off the record after their time at the scholam, so there's no reason anyone scrutinising the school's register in an official capacity should question it. Pupils leave, sign up indentures, contracts, hold-employs, but then these documents lead nowhere.'

'From which you deduce what?' I asked, though I could see Carl had the answer ready in the front of his mind.

'The scholam is a front. It's... laundering children and young adults. Raising them, training them, nurturing them, and then moving them as a commodity into other hands. The fact that the pupils are known only by their scholam names means that they can be slipped away unnoticed. It's quite brilliant.'

'Because they take in anonymous children, give them new identities to provide them with legal status, and then sell them on under cover of perfectly correct and perfectly untraceable paperwork?'

'Just so,' said Carl.

'What do they do with them?' I wondered.

‘Whatever they like, would be my guess,’ said Wystan, glancing up from his tawdry book. I hadn’t even realised he’d been listening. ‘Those three we’re tracking, they ended up as hired guns, probably because they were handy in that regard. Strong guys get muscle work. Pretty girls...’

‘Whatever else we do,’ I said, ‘we’re closing that place down.’

VII

THE CELL WAS a metal box and smelled of piss. The ginger-haired man opened the hatch and dragged Patience out. She tried to resist, but her limbs were weak and her mind muddy. The ginger-haired man still had his limiter off.

His name was DaRolle, that much she had learned, and he worked for a man called Loketter.

‘On your feet, darling.’ DaRolle said. ‘They’re waiting for you.’ He prodded her along the dim hallway. Patience didn’t know where she was, but she knew it was at least a day since she had been taken from the scholam by these men.

‘It’s Patience, right?’ the ginger-haired man said. ‘Your trophy name?’

‘My what?’

‘Trophy name. The scholam gives you all trophy names, ready for the game. And yours is Patience, isn’t it?’

‘Where are my sisters?’ she asked.

‘Forget you ever had any.’

Loketter, the man in red, was waiting for them in a richly appointed salon at the end of the hallway. There were other men with him, all distinguished older males just like him, sitting around on couches and buoy-chairs, smoking lho and sipping amasec. Patience had seen their type so many times before at graduation suppers. Men of wealth and status – mill owners and merchants, shipmasters and guilders – and Patience had dreamed of the day when one of them would select her for service, employment, a future.

How hollow that seemed now. For all their grooming, for all their fine clothes and fancy manners, these men were predators. The scholam which she had trusted for so long had simply been their feeding ground.

‘Here she is.’ smiled Loketter. The men applauded lazily.

‘Still in her scholam clothes.’ a fat man in green said with relish. ‘A nice touch, Loketter.’

‘I know you like them fresh, Boroht. Her name is Patience, and she is a telekine. I’m not sure if she realises she is a telekine, actually. Do you, my dear? Do you know what you are?’

Loketter addressed the last part of his question at her. Patience flushed.

‘I know what I am.’ she said.

‘And what is that?’

‘Trapped amongst a bunch of perverts.’ she said.

The men laughed.

‘Oh, such spirit!’ said Boroht.

‘And pretty green eyes too!’ said another man, swathed in orange furs.

‘The wager is seven thousand crowns per half hour of survival.’ Loketter announced.

‘Very high.’ said the man in furs. ‘What is the area, and the jeopardy?’

‘Low Tenalt,’ replied Loketter, and several of the men laughed. ‘Low Tenalt.’ Loketter repeated. ‘And the jeopardy is the Dolors. Although, if she’s nimble, she might make it to Pennyraker territory, in which case the wager increases by another hundred and fifty.’

‘How many pawns?’ asked a tall, bearded man in a selpic blue doublet.

‘Standard rules, Vevian. One per player. Open choice. Body weapons only, although I’ll allow a gun per pawn for jeopardy work. Guns are not to be used for taking the quarry, as I have no need to remind you. Gunshot death or disintegration voids the game and the pot goes to the house.’

‘Observation?’ asked a thin man in grey robes.

‘Servo-skull picter, as standard. House will supply eight. You’ll each be allowed two of your own.’

‘Will she be armed?’ Boroth asked.

‘I don’t know. Would you care to chose a weapon?’ Loketter asked Patience.

‘What is the game?’ she replied.

More laughter.

‘Life, of course.’ Loketter said. ‘A weapon, Patience? DaRolle, show her.’

The ginger-haired man walked over to a varnished hardwood case set on a side table, opened it and revealed the numerous polished blades and exotic killing devices laid out on the velvet cushion.

‘Choose, darling.’ he said.

Patience shook her head. ‘I’m not a fighter. Not a killer.’

‘Darling, if you’re going to live for even ten minutes, you’ll have to be both.’

‘I refuse.’ said Patience. ‘Frig you very much, “darling”.’

DaRolle tutted and closed the case.

‘Unarmed?’ Boroth said. ‘I’ll take the wager, Loketter. In fact, I’ll double you.’

‘Fourteen taken and offered.’ Loketter announced.

‘Taken.’ said a man in pink suede.

‘I’m in.’ said the bearded man Loketter had called Vevian.

Four of the others agreed too, opening money belts and casket bands and tossing piles of cash on the low, dished table at Loketter’s feet. In ten seconds there was a thousand times more money in that baize bowl than Patience had ever even imagined.

‘Begin,’ Loketter said, rising to his feet. ‘Pawns to the outer door for inspection and preparation. Drones will be scanned prior to release. I know your tricks, Boroth.’

Boroth chuckled and waved a pudgy hand.

‘The game will commence in thirty minutes.’ Loketter walked over to face Patience. ‘I have great faith in your abilities, Patience. Don’t let me down. Don’t lose me money.’

She spat in his face.

Loketter smiled. 'That's exactly what I was looking for. DaRolle?'

The ginger-haired man grabbed Patience by the arms and marched her out of the room. They went down a maze of long, brass tunnels and finally up some iron steps into what seemed like a loading dock or an air-gate.

'Go stand by the doors, darling,' he said.

'What happens now?' Patience asked.

'Now you run for your life until they get you,' DaRolle said.

Patience put her hands against the rusted hatchway, and then pulled them away as the hatch rumbled open.

She didn't know what to expect when she looked out. Beyond the hatchway, the shadowy wastes of the slum-tracts stretched away into the distance.

'I won't go out there,' she growled.

DaRolle came up behind her and shoved her outside. Patience fell into the dirt.

'Word of advice,' called the ginger-haired man. 'If you want it, anyway. Watch for the Dolors. They use the shadow. Don't trust black.'

'I don't t—' Patience began.

But the hatch slammed shut.

Patience got to her feet. Gloom surrounded her. A hot, stinking wind blew in through the nearby ruins, smelling of garbage and city rot.

Somewhere, something whooped gleefully in the darkness. A lifter rambled overhead, its lights flashing. When she turned, she saw the immensity of the hive filling the sky behind her like a cliff, extending up as far as she could see.

She started to run.

VIII

THERE WAS SOMETHING wrong with Prefect Cyrus's face: a blush of burst blood vessels that even careful treatment with a medicae's dermo-wand had failed to conceal. He was trying to be civil, and was clearly impressed by his visitor's apparel, but he was also put out.

'This is irregular, I'm afraid.' he fussed as he led them into a waiting room where Imperial teachings were writ in gold leaf on the darkwood panels. 'There are appointed times for inspection, and also for apprenticeship dealings. Take a seat, won't you?'

'I apologise for the difficulties I'm causing.' Carl replied. 'But time is rather pressing, and you came highly recommended.'

'I see.' said Cyrus.

'And I have... resources to make it worth your while.'

'Indeed.' smiled Cyrus. 'And your name is?'

'I'd prefer not to deal in names.' Carl smiled.

'Then perhaps I should show you out, sir. This is a respectable academy.'

Sitting cross-legged on the old couch, his fur-trimmed mantle turned back over his shoulder to expose the crimson falchapetta lining, Carl Thonius beckoned with one gloved hand to Kara, who stood waiting in the doorway. Kara was robed and cowed like some dumb servitor, and carried a heavy casket. As she approached, Carl leaned over and flipped the casket lid open.

'Lutillium. Twenty ingots, each of a weight of one eighth. I'll leave it to you to calculate the market price, Prefect.'

Cyrus licked his lips slightly. 'I, ah... what is it you want, sir?'

'Two boys, two girls. No younger than eleven, no older than thirteen. Healthy. Fit. Comely. Clean.'

'This is, ah...'

'I'm sorry, I'm being very direct.' said Carl. 'I should have said this before. *This is a matter of the most pleasant fraternal confidence.*'

'I see.' said Cyrus. Carl had just used one of the cognitae's private recognition codes, by which one graduate knew another. 'I'll just see

what's taking those refreshments so long to arrive.'

The Prefect bustled out of the room and hurried down a gloomy hallway to where Ide was waiting.

'Bring the others in.' Cyrus whispered to him. 'Do it quickly. If this is on the level, we look to earn well. But I have a feeling.'

Ide nodded.

In the waiting room, Carl sat back and winked at Kara.

+The Prefect's suspicious.+

'Really?' Carl said softly. 'And I thought I was bringing such veracity to the part.'

+Get ready. Nayl?+

Harlon Nayl grunted as he drove another crampon into the crumbling outer brick of the tower's side, and played out his line to bring him closer to a ninth floor window. A terrible updraft from the stack-chasm below tugged at his clothing.

'Ready enough.' he replied.

+Harlon's in position. Carl? You can do the honours.+

'Thank you, sir.' he whispered. 'It'll be a pleasure.'

Cyrus came back into the room, smiling broadly. 'Caffeine and cusp cake is just on its way. The cake is very fine, very gingery.'

'I can't wait.' Carl said.

+They're closing in. Four now arriving at the west door. Three on the stairs behind Kara. Two more approaching from the floor above. All ex-Guard. Armed with batons. And I read at least one firearm.+

Carl rose to his feet. 'Oh, Prefect? There is one other thing I did want to say.'

'And that is?' asked Cyrus.

Carl smiled his toothiest smile. 'In the name of the Holy Inquisition, you motherless wretch, surrender now.'

Cyrus gasped and began to back away. 'Ide! Ide!' he screamed.

Kara hurled the casket and it slammed into Cyrus's midsection, felling him hard. He grunted in pain and several of the heavy ingots scattered across the floor.

+Move!+

Kara threw off her drab robe and flew forward as the first rigorist came in through the doorway. Guns were forbidden in the scholam, but that didn't prevent this man from carrying one. Weapon scanners around the entry gate screened visitors for firearms. But lutillium, apart from its monetary worth, had value as a substance opaque to scanners.

Rigorist Ide raised his handgun as he came in. Kara, on her knees, reached into the fallen casket and produced the Tronsvasse compact hidden between the layers of ingots.

'Surprise.' she said, and buried a caseless round in his forehead. The rear part of Ide's skull burst like a squeezed pimple and he fell on his back.

She got up, shot the sprawled Cyrus once through the back of the thigh to make sure he wasn't going anywhere, and swung to face the door. The next two rigorists burst in on Ide's heels, batons raised, and she shot out their knees. Thonius winced and covered his ears.

In the hall outside, the other rigorists backed in terror from the sound of gunfire. Then a shaped charge blew out the casement behind them in a blizzard of glass and leading, and Harlon Nayl swung into the hallway. He had a large automatic pistol in his left fist.

'Any takers?' he asked.

One ran, and Nayl shot him through the heel. The others sank to their knees, hands to their heads.

'Good lads.' Nayl said. He took a neural disruptor from his belt in his right hand and walked over to them, cracking each one comatose with a fierce zap from the blunt device.

In the waiting room, the air threaded with gun-smoke, Kara turned to face the opposite doors as other alerted rigorists crashed in from the stairs. Knill led them, and didn't even blink at the sight of the small woman with the handgun. He flew at her.

‘Ninker!’ she complained, and shot him. The round penetrated his torso and didn’t slow him. He crashed into her and knocked her flat.

Souzerin and another rigorist named Fewik were right behind Knill. Fewik knocked Carl over with a blow from his baton, and Souzerin raised the battered bolt pistol that he carried since his days in the commissariat. He fired at Kara, but managed only to blow off Knill’s left foot and his left arm at the elbow.

Nayl appeared at the opposite door and yelled a warning that Souzerin answered by lifting his aim and blasting at the doorway. Brick chips and wooden splinters exploded from the jamb. Kara reached out from under Knill’s deadweight and shot Souzerin up through the chin. The rigorist left the ground for a moment, then crashed back down dead. Nayl reappeared and put a round through Fewik’s back as he turned to flee.

Nayl helped Kara out from under the half-dead brute.

‘Nobody help me up then.’ Carl complained.

Panic had seized the scholam. I could feel it, breathe it. Hundreds of children and young adults, terrified by the explosions and gunshots. And a deeper panic, a deeper dread, that emanated from the minds of the rigorists and tutors.

I hovered towards the main gate, Wystan at my side, and ripped the ancient doors off their hinges with a brisk nudge of my mind. Inside the entrance way, half a dozen tutors and rigorists were running towards us, hoping for a speedy exit.

+I am Inquisitor Ravenor of the holy ordos! Remain where you are!+

I don’t think they understood the manner of the command, though several involuntarily defecated in fear as the telepathic burst hit them. All they saw was a lone man approaching beside a strange, covered chair.

+Now!+

My psi-wave threw them all backwards violently, like the pressure blast of a hurricane. Windows shattered. They tumbled over, robes shredding, flying like dolls or desperately trying to grip onto the floor.

Wystan lit a lho-stick. ‘What I like about you.’ he said, ‘is that you don’t muck around.’

‘Thank you.’

I had switched to vox-ponder and now I activated my built in voxcaster. ‘This is Ravenor to Magistratum Fairwing. Your officers may now move in and secure the building as instructed.’

‘Yes, inquisitor.’

‘Do not harm any of the children.’

IX

I HAD EXPECTED to find many things within the scholam: evidence of abuse and cruelty certainly, damaged souls, perhaps even answers, if I was lucky.

I had not expected to find traces of psyker activity.

‘What’s the matter?’ Kara asked me.

+I’m not sure.+

We moved down the long hallways, past the frightened faces of pupils herded along by the Magistratum officers, past whimpering tutors spread against the old walls as they were patted down for concealed weapons. The traces were slight, ephemeral, fading, like strands of gossamer clinging to the brickwork. But they were there.

+There was a psyker here.+

Kara stiffened.

+Relax. He... no, I believe it was a she. She’s not here anymore. But she was here for a long time and she left only recently.+

‘When you say a long time, you mean?’

+Years.+

‘And when you say recently...?’

+Days, maybe less.+

We explored the tower. For Kara, this was a curious process. She could not see or feel, taste or smell the traces that were so evident to me. She just followed me around, one empty room after another. I could sense her boredom and her frustration. She wanted to be with the others, active, rounding up the last of the scholam's inhabitants.

‘Sorry. This must be tedious for you.’ I said.

‘It’s fine,’ she replied. ‘Take your time. I can be patient. Patience is a virtue.’

‘Indeed.’ We entered a large dining hall in the upper reaches of the tower. The traces were strongest and freshest there.

‘Telekine.’ I said. ‘I’m in no doubt. A telekine, raw but potentially strong.’

‘We have to find her.’ Kara said. ‘If this damn place really was grooming subjects for the cognitae, she could be a lead. A direct connection to a cognitae procurer.’

Kara was right. Amongst their many crimes, the cognitae prided themselves on recruiting and retaining unlicensed psykers for their own purposes.

‘Go and find Carl for me, Kara.’ I requested. ‘I want to get him working on discovering who this psyker was and where she might have gone.’

‘Because of the cognitae link.’ she nodded.

‘Yes, because of that.’ I replied. ‘But even if no link exists, we still have to find her. An unsanctioned psyker, lose on Sameter. That cannot be permitted. We must track her down. And dispose of her.’

X

‘I’M SORRY,’ CARL Thonius said. ‘Sir, I’m very sorry.’

The device was very small, no larger than a hearing aid implant.

‘I should have searched him right there, but with all the shooting and screaming—’

‘Don’t worry about it, Carl.’ I said.

‘I think I will, sir. Everything’s blanked.’

The device was a trigger switch, coded to Cyrus’s thumb print. An advanced piece of tech. Down on the floor, helpless from the wound Kara had delivered to his leg, Cyrus had plucked this device from his pocket and activated it. And the scholam’s entire data archive had been erased.

‘Can you recover anything?’ I asked.

‘It’s a fairly comprehensive wipe. I might be able to recode the last few days worth of material. The stuff most recently processed might still exist in the codification buffer.’

‘Do what you can.’ I advised. Privately, I was annoyed with his lapse. But we had, with the assistance of local law-enforcement, rounded up dozens of tutors and scholam elders, including Cyrus himself. And who could say what the poor pupils themselves might be able to tell us?

Besides, it was hardly surprising. Carl was so poor in circumstances of violence. I don’t believe he had ever fired a shot in anger, though he performed well enough in weapons drill.

‘I’ll get to work, sir.’ Carl said. ‘I’m so very sorry—’

‘So you bloody should be.’ Nayl snorted.

‘Enough, Harlon!’ I rebuked. ‘Carl is my interrogator and you will address him with respect.’

‘I’ll do that.’ Nayl replied, ‘when he earns it.’

‘Do what you can, Carl.’ I said. ‘But remember, your priority is to find out all there is to know about the unsanctioned psyker they had here. Who she was, where she went. She has to be found and dealt with, quickly.’

‘Yes, sir.’

As Carl moved away, the senior magistratum approached. His enforcement officers, clad in black and silver, were still clearing the scholam floor by floor. I could sense his unease. He was an experienced criminologist, but he’d never had his entire station house requisitioned to

assist the Inquisition before. He was terrified of screwing up. He was terrified of me.

‘Problems?’ I asked.

‘A few scuffles, sir. You’d rather taken the wind out of their sails.’

‘I want all the children to be given medical checks, and then safe-housed until statements can be taken from them all. Inform the Administration that welfare assistance will be required, but not yet. No one is to be rehoused or re-homed unless they’ve been examined. Why do you frown?’

The magistratum started a little. ‘There are over nine hundred children, sir...’ he began.

‘Improvise. Ask the local temples for alms and shelter.’

‘Yes, sir. May I ask... is this an abuse case, sir?’

‘Indirectly. I can’t say more. The staff I’ll interview here, now. I’ll need some of your men to assist in guarding them while the interrogations are underway. Once I’m done, I will file charges, and you can begin to process them.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I’ll start with the Prefect.’

A magistratum first-aider had patched Cyrus’s leg wound, and they’d shackled him to a chair in one of the refectories. He was in pain, and very frightened, which would make it easier to extract information.

Cyrus stared at me as I rolled in to face him. Nayl followed me in, but sat his ominous bulk down at the far end of the long table from Cyrus, a threat waiting to happen.

‘I... I have rights,’ Cyrus began. ‘In the eyes of Imperial Law, I have—’

‘Nothing. You are a prisoner of the Inquisition. Do not ask for or expect anything.’

‘Then I’ll tell you nothing.’

‘Again, you are mistaken. You will tell me everything I ask you to tell me. Harlon?’

From the far end of the table, Nayl began to speak. ‘His name is Ludovic Kyro, Cognitae-trained, wanted on five worlds for counts of heresy and sedition...’

Cyrus dosed his eyes as the words came out. We already knew his true identity. What else did we have?

‘Tell me about Victor Zahn.’

Cyrus frowned. ‘I don’t know a Victor Zhan...’ I was watching his mind. It wasn’t the truth, but it wasn’t an outright lie either. Cyrus didn’t immediately recognise the name.

+Tell me about Victor Zahn.+

Cyrus blinked as the telepathy slapped him. My interrogative was accompanied by an image of Zahn’s corpse in the Hinmlight’s morgue which I dropped into his mind like a slide into a magic lantern.

‘Oh Throne!’ he murmured.

‘You know him, then?’

‘He was a pupil here, years ago.’

+And Goodman Frell? And Noble Soto?+

Two more graphic images.

‘Oh, Holy! They were pupils too. This was years ago. Five or more.’

‘And you groomed them,’ said Nayl. ‘You and your staff. Groomed them like you groom all the poor strays who wind up here. Sold them on.’

‘No, this is a respectable place and—’

‘So respectable,’ I said, ‘that you wipe all your records so we can’t see them.’

Cyrus bit his lip.

‘Zahn. Frell. Soto. Who did you sell them too?’

‘T-to a merchant, as I remember.’

Lie. Bald and heavy. And well formed, not just vocally, but mentally too. A layer of mendacity cloaked Cyrus’s thoughts, like a cake of dried mud. A mind-trick, one of the many taught by the Cognitae. I had been expecting as much. For all his fear, Cyrus was still a product of that

heretical institution, and therefore had to be unlocked with precision. If I'd just burst into his mind telepathically from the outset, I might have damaged or destroyed many of his locked engrams. But now I had a solid lie out of him, and that lie revealed the way his mind-shields worked: their focus, their strengths, their inclination.

‘Who did you sell them too?’

‘I told you, a merchant. A free trader.’

+Who?+

He squealed as the psi-jab rattled his mind. He was utterly unprepared for the sharpness of it.

‘That was a demonstration of how things will be if you resist.’ I said. ‘Now I’m going to ask the question once more...’

XI

PATIENCE HEARD THE buzzing, not with her ears but with her mind, and slid into cover behind a crumbling rockcrete wall. Moments later, a varnished human skull hovered past through the gloom. Tech implants decorated the back of its cranium, and lights shone in its hollow orbits. A sensor drone, sweeping for her. She'd heard the bastards talking about them before her release. This was the first physical proof that men were actually after her.

Men. Hunters. Killers.

The skull hovered on the spot for a moment, circled once, and then sped away into the shadows. Patience stayed low. After another minute, a second drone – this one built around the skull of a dog or cat – skimmed past and made off in another direction.

She slowed her breathing, and deliberately encouraged her mind to do the sort of tricks that usually happened unbidden. She reached out. She could feel the area around her in a radius of ten metres, forty, sixty. The shape of the geography: the sloping trench to her left, the broken columns ahead, the line of burned-out habs to her right. Behind her, the sewer outfall

pouring sludge into a cracked storm drain. She sensed bright sparks of mental energy, but they were just rats scuttling in the ruins.

Then she sensed one that wasn't.

This spark was bigger, human, very controlled and intense. Right ahead, beyond the columns, moving forward.

Moving slowly so as not to dislodge any loose stones, she turned and began to creep away around the storm-drain chute towards a jumble of plasteel rains. Her left toe kicked a rock and it rolled away off the drain's edge and started to fall. Patience caught it neatly with her mind and lifted it up into the silence of her hand.

The brief delay had been to her advantage. Now she sensed three or four human mind-traces in the ruins ahead of her. Not focused like the other one, feral. In the shadows.

Don't trust the black, that's what DaRolle had said to her. Trouble was, could she trust DaRolle's advice?

She crouched low, and stayed there until she could see them. Ragged human shapes, barely visible, moving like animals through the ruins.

Gangers, members of the notorious Dolor clan. She could see three, but was sure there were more. The hunter was closing from the right, now almost at the rockcrete wall.

Patience lifted the rock in her hand and threw it, sending it far further than her arm alone could have managed. It landed in the trench with a loud clatter.

The hunter turned and made for it immediately. She got a glimpse of a man in an armoured jack and high boots scurrying towards the lip of the trench.

Then the Dolors saw him too.

A pivot-gun roared and the hunter was knocked off his feet. The gangers rushed forward at once, baying and yelling, crude blade weapons flashing in their dirty hands.

The hunter's jack had stopped the worst of the ball round. He leapt back up, and shot the closest Dolor through the neck with his handgun. The

savage figure spasmed and went down thrashing. Then the others cannoned into the hunter and they all went over into the trench.

Patience started to run. She heard another shot behind her. A scream.

She scrambled over a rusted length of vent-ducting, and dropped into the cavity of a roofless hab...

...where a man was waiting for her.

Patience gasped. There had been no spark off him at all. Either he was shielded, or his mind just did not register to her gift like regular human minds.

He was tall and thin, clothed head to foot in a matt-black, skin-tight body suit. Only his eyes were visible through a slit in the tight mask, but she saw the way the fabric beneath them stretched to betray the smile that had just crossed his face. He held a long, slender spike-knife in each hand.

Patience stretched out with her mind, hoping to push him away, but the tendrils of her gift slipped off his black suit, unable to purchase. He lunged at her, the twin blades extended, and she was forced to dive sideways, grazing her palms and knees on the rough ground. She started to roll, but he was on her at once, the tip of one blade slicing through the flesh of her left shoulder.

Patience cried out, but the pain gave her strength. She kicked out, and as the man jumped back, she flipped onto her feet. She backed as he circled again. She could hear him chuckle, feel the blood running down her arm.

He lunged again, leading with his right-hand blade. She ducked it, and came out under his arm, but the other blade raked across the back of her right hand as she tried to fend him off. She punched at him. He struck her in the side of the head with the ball of his right hand and knocked her onto the ground.

There was a rushing sound in her head. She thought of her sisters, and the mother she could no longer picture. In desperation, she lashed out with her gift, but the killer's black skin-suit again rendered him proof against her power. It was too slippery. She couldn't get hold of anything except—

The man stumbled backwards in surprise as the knives flew out of his hands. He might have been armoured against a telekine, head to toe, but his blades were good, old-fashioned solid objects.

Patience pulled them both in until they were slowly orbiting her body as she rose. It would be the matter of a moment to toss them both away out of the hunter's reach.

But she had a much better idea.

With a bark of effort, she drove them point-first towards his eye-slit and nailed his skull against the back wall of the hab.

XII

CARL THONIUS KNOCKED on the refectory door and waited for a response. From inside, the oddly modulated screams and yelps of Prefect Cyrus shivered the air. As he waited, Carl glanced round at the four magistratum troopers guarding the hallway. They were clearly unnerved by the strange sounds of human pain echoing from the refectory. Carl smiled breezily, but got no response. He knocked again.

The screams ebbed for a moment, and the door flew open. Nayl peered out.

‘What?’ he spat.

‘I need a word, dear fellow. With the boss.’

‘Don’t “dear fellow” me, frig-face. Is this important? He’s busy!’

‘Well,’ Carl stammered. He was always edgy when he had to deal with the big ex-bounty hunter. ‘It is, sort of.’

Nayl sneered. ‘Sort of doesn’t cut it.’ He slammed the door in Carl’s face.

Carl cursed and knocked again. Nayl threw the door back open.

‘Don’t do that.’ Carl snapped. ‘Don’t treat me like that—’

‘Oh, go away you frig-wipe.’

Carl looked Nayl in the eyes. ‘Know your place, Nayl. You may not like me, but I am his interrogator. I want to see him now.’

Nayl looked Thonius up and down. 'Balls after all.' he said, grudgingly. 'Okay.'

Carl walked into the room. Cyrus was slumped forward in his chains, wheezing, blood leaking from his tearducts. Kara sat on a chair just inside the door, her face grim.

'Carl?' I said softly. 'This isn't really time for an interruption.'

'Sir, I've been trying to recover the lost data. The erased data. There's really not much to get back, I'm afraid. I doubt we'll ever find out what happened to most of the poor children laundered through this place.'

'Your incompetence could have waited,' Nayl said.

'Stop ragging on him, Nayl.' Kara hissed.

Carl shot Nayl a dark look. I could tell there was something more.

'I told you I might be able to recode the last few days worth of material. Uh, recently processed material still existing in the codification buffer.'

'Yes, Carl'

He cleared his throat. 'There was one item there. A record of a transaction made two nights ago. An older female pupil named Patience. Groomed by these bastards partly because of her spirit, and mostly because she was a latent telekine.'

I swung round to face him. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes, sir.'

'A telekine?'

He nodded. 'The recoding is pretty clear. I think she was the psyker you were looking for.'

'Did you say her name was Patience?' Kara asked quietly.

'Yes, why?' Carl replied. She shrugged. She was holding something back.

'Kara?' I nudged.

'It's nothing.' she said. 'Just, when you were looking around, for traces of her, you thought I was bored and I said—'

'Patience is a virtue.' I finished.

Kara nodded. 'Yeah, Patience is a virtue. Spooky.'

‘Coincidence.’ Nayl muttered.

‘Believe me, Harlon.’ I said, ‘in the length and breadth of this great Imperium of Man, there is no such thing as coincidence. Not where psyk is involved.’

‘Duly noted.’ he replied, not caring or believing.

‘Where did this Patience go, Carl?’ I asked.

‘She was sold for ten thousand to a narcobaron cartel who purchased her for use in a game they like to play.’

‘A game?’ I asked.

‘The record implies this is not the first subject the scholam has sold to the cartel for this purpose. I say game, it’s more sport. They release the purchased child into the slum-tracts and then... then they gamble on how long he or she will survive. Once they send their hunters out.’

‘So what?’ asked Nayl. ‘They’ll clean up our little psyk-witch loose end without us having to break a sweat.’

‘If the records are true.’ I warned. ‘Consider this. There might be a game. There might be a narcobaron with a taste for barbaric gladiatorial sport. On the other hand, all those things might be a substitution code to conceal an act of purchase to a Cognitae procurer.’

‘I actually don’t know which would be worse.’ Kara said.

I turned back to Cyrus. He whined as my mind re-entered his. He was still weak and reeling from our initial session, and by rights I should have left him a while to be sure of getting accurate responses. But there was no time. An unsanctioned menace was loose somewhere, or already leaving the planet under close watch.

I tried a few key phrases – ‘the psyker’, ‘the telekine’, ‘Patience’ – pushing them at his mind in the way a child rams shaped blocks at a box, hoping to find the right hole to fit. He responded with various recurring words: *Loketter*, *the game*, *trophy worth...*

I wasn’t sure how hard to push. I wasn’t sure if I was slamming him back against the limits of truth, where there is nowhere left for sanity to go, or simply meeting some form of substitution. Substitution was another

standard Cognitae mind ploy. Anticipating psychic interrogation, the brotherhood mnemonically learned to replace the details of true memories with engrammatic euphemisms. *Narcobaron*, for example, could stand for *procurer*. *Game* might stand for *purpose*. It was a simple but almost unbreakable deceit. Well-schooled, a Cognitae brother could mask memories with metaphors. He could not be caught out in a lie, because he wasn't lying. The truth had been erased and replaced with other facts. Using such techniques, a member of the brotherhood might withstand the most serious psyk-scrutiny, because the truth was no longer there to uncover.

'He's giving me nothing.' I cursed, turning away. 'Unless it is the truth. Do you have an active lead, Carl?'

Thonius nodded.

Kara got to her feet. 'Let's go and find her.' she said. 'If the story's real, I mean if there is this frigging barbaric game actually going on, there's a girl out there who really, really needs help right now.'

'Throne! Let her die!' Nayl barked. 'Frigging psyker! What? What?' Kara and Thonius were already heading for the door.

'One life, Harlon.' I said as I slid past him. 'I learned many things from Eisenhower, but ruthlessness was not one of them. Thousands may die, millions even, unless Molotch is found and brought to justice. But any count of a million starts with one, and to ignore one life when there is still a chance of saving it, well, one might as well give up on the other nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine as well.'

'Whatever.' said Nayl.

'Thank you for your vote of confidence.' I said. 'Kara, inform the magistratum that these interviews are suspended until we return.'

XIII

THE ARMOURED MANSE did indeed belong to the man named Loketter, and nineteen counts of narco-traffic were outstanding on his name. The manse

was a brass mushroom that dominated a long slope of rubble scree above the shadowland of the slum-tracts. Down here, with the monolithic bulk of Urbitane behind us, the immensity of the urban squalor and rain was shocking to see.

The manse was ferro-armoured, and shielded, but our scanners lit with the buzz of electromag activity inside.

‘Signals!’ Kara reported. ‘They’re running drones out into the slum.’

‘Can you track them?’ I asked.

‘Working...’ She adjusted some dials. ‘I’ve got a lock on nine. Covering a hex-grid twelve by ten. Map comparison... Throne, these archives are so old! Here we go. An area known as Low Tenalt.’

‘Details?’

‘Serious slum-land,’ Carl said, speed-viewing the data on his codifier. ‘Basically wreckage. High probability of gang activity. Territorially, the gangs are the Dolors and, to the west, the ruin-burbs are ran by the so-called Pennyraiders. Magistratum advice is to avoid this area.’

‘Really?’

Carl shrugged. ‘Magistratum advice is a blanket “avoid the slum-tracts”, so what the hey?’

‘How far?’ I asked.

At the helm of the cargo-gig, Nayl consulted the gyro-nav built into the stick. ‘Eight spans to the Low Tenalt area from here, on boost.’

‘Do it,’ I said.

‘You don’t want to level this manse first?’ Nayl asked.

‘They can wait. This girl can’t.’

Nayl nodded reluctantly, and hit the boosters. He wasn’t in this like the rest of us were. Running low, like a pond-fly skating the surface, we zipped through the ruined landscape, skipping rubble heaps, ducking under shattered transit bridges, running fast and low along the brick-waste gouges that had once been hab-streets.

Everything was a grey gloom, caught in the immense shadow of the city. Such rain, such endless ruin...

‘Coming up, point three.’ reported Nayl, hauling on the stick. The engines whined shrill. ‘Two... one... setting down.’

The gig thumped and slithered as it settled on the loose brick.

Carl, Nayl and Kara were already up, arming weapons.

‘Sit down, Carl.’ I said. ‘I need you to run scope from here.’

‘Oh.’ he said.

‘I want full scanner input.’ I said as I hovered towards the opening hatch behind Kara and Harlon. ‘Wystan can watch your back.’

‘You’re going yourself?’ Wystan asked, surprised. It was one of the few times I’d ever heard emotion in his voice.

‘Yes.’ I said.

Kara and Harlon looked at me.

‘Yes, I’m coming with you.’ I said. ‘Have you got a problem with that?’

‘It’s just—’ Kara began.

‘You don’t usually...’ Nayl finished.

‘This isn’t usually.’ I said, and powered out past them into the chilly gloom.

Nayl leapt out after me, his Urdeshi-made assault gun cinched high around his broad frame. Kara paused and looked back at Wystan and Thonius. ‘Lock the door.’ she grinned. And don’t open it unless you know it’s us. Even then, keep your powder dry.’

She jumped out, raised her Manumet 90 riot gun, and ran to join us.

Carl swallowed. Wystan Frauka got up, and locked the hatch shut. He looked at Carl, lit yet another lho-stick and patted the handgun tucked into his belt. ‘I got your back, Carly.’ he said.

‘Great.’ said Thonius. He turned to regard the sweeping screens of the scanner and adjusted his vox mic.

‘Getting this?’ he called.

‘Loud and obnoxiously clear.’ Nayl crackled back.

‘Ha ha ha. Funny. Not. Move west, two hundred metres, then head north along the axis of the old fuel store. The drones seem to be gathering there.’

‘Thank you, Carl.’ I responded.

We moved through the wasteland. It was one of the few times my state allowed me speedier and quieter access than my able-bodied friends. Nayl and Kara followed, clambering over the dunes of rubble.

‘See anything you like?’ Kara said.

‘I don’t frigging believe we’re doing this.’ Nayl grumbled.

‘Move left. Left!’ Carl’s voice rasped over the vox. ‘I’ve got drones moving now. Gunshots.’

‘I heard them.’ Nayl said, and started away to the left.

‘Flank him wide, Kara.’ I said, and she moved away in the opposite direction.

‘Throne.’ I heard Carl say. ‘I think we were right. I think this is some kind of frigging game.’

I propelled myself forward. Both Kara and Harlon were out of sight now, though I could sense them just fifty metres away, each side of me.

The twisted ruins of the tracts rose up on left and right. I tasted life-signs.

‘Hello?’ I transponded.

The Dolors appeared out of the gloom. Ragged, emaciated, filthy, feral. There were twenty of them.

Blackened teeth bared in wild grins. They raised their cudgels and spears and charged.

‘Your mistake.’ I said.

XIV

THE BARONS WERE laughing. Most of them were drunk, or out of their heads on lhotus and obscura.

DaRolle looked up from the drone relay.

‘Have we got the bitch yet?’ Borothe demanded.

‘You wish.’ DaRolle said. He walked across the lounge and crouched down beside Loketter.

‘What?’ asked the man in red.

‘New players just entered the game.’ DaRolle said.

Loketter sat up. ‘Show me.’

DaRolle held out his data-slate. ‘Three on the ground. A gig too, grounded there.’

‘What the hell is this?’

‘Problem, Loketter?’ asked Vevian.

Loketter rose and smiled. ‘Not a problem, but a bonus element to our game today. Look at your scans. See? Newcomers.’

‘Who the frig are they?’ Gandinsky blurted.

‘Interlopers.’ Loketter said. ‘House will pay two thousand for each one killed. Firearms permitted.’

The intoxicated crowd applauded this energetically.

Loketter looked at DaRolle. ‘The ones on the ground I can get these fools to mess with.’ he whispered. ‘You go and fry up this gig.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. Find out who these fools are. Then burn it and every one on it.’

DaRolle nodded. ‘Pleasure.’ he said.

XV

PATIENCE WAS STILL running. The Dolors, invisible in the shadows but everywhere now, were jeering and caterwauling, their strangled cries echoing around the ragged walls and shattered windows.

They were calling out to her, taunting her, abusing her with obscene words and suggestions, many of which, thankfully, were so choked by the gang-argot they made no sense.

Occasionally, stones or pieces of trash came flying out of the darkness at her, and she deflected all those she could. Some found her, especially the

stinging stone bullets launched from catapults and slings.

Her instinct was to head back towards the colossal city, but no matter how much ground she managed to cover, it seemed not to get any closer. Its sheer scale made the distance hard to judge. It was probably kilometres away still.

She reached the ruins of a manufactory, its ply-steel roof collapsed. Seas of garbage and rubble spread out from its eastern side, and she began to pick her way across the weed-choked waste. Behind her, she could hear the gangers scurrying through the manufactory ruins. A few missiles flew out after her.

A figure suddenly appeared ahead of her, across the sea of trash. A small male, or perhaps a female, who'd been down in cover behind the remains of a yard wall, hidden by a chameleon cloak. Glancing up, Patience cursed as she saw a hunter drone that had obviously been shadowing her for several minutes.

Patience changed course, and began to run away from the figure. She ran wide across the overgrown trash. The figure started to follow, trying to cut her off, running hard, but neither made particularly good going. The trash and rubble was so uneven, so treacherous. Patience kept tripping, stumbling, turning her ankles.

As soon as the hunter appeared, the jeering from the invisible Dolors grew more ferocious. Catapult missiles and even the occasional arrow whipped out from the manufactory at the hunter.

The hunter – and it was clearly a female – stopped in her tracks, and produced an autopistol. She slammed in a clip and fired three times at the manufactory.

The shells must have been high-ex, because each impact went up like a grenade. Sections of the manufactory ruin blew in, and the Dolors went very quiet suddenly.

Patience was still running. The hunter put the gun away and resumed the chase.

A second drone zoomed into view suddenly, circled Patience once and then headed for the hunter. The woman stopped again, looking round frantically as she reached for her sidearm. Patience half-heard her shout a question into her vox-set.

There was a loud crack, a peripheral flash of light, and the female hunter jolted suddenly as a las-round went clean through her torso. She crumpled without a sound.

Her killer appeared, directly ahead of Patience. She skidded to a halt. He was big, and wore segmented plating over a coat of green hide. A glowing augmetic implant covered one eye. He had a las-carbine in his hands.

He stared at Patience for a moment, then put the carbine away in the leather boot over his shoulders. Then he drew a large dagger with a twisted black blade and took a step towards her.

‘Make it easy now, and I promise you won’t feel nothing.’ he said.

Patience was breathing hard from the running. It made it easier somehow to summon up her gift. The man thought the first couple of stones that came flying at him were from the gangers, but then more came, and more, larger rocks, pieces of trash, chunks of garbage. Debris started showering off the ground all around her, whipping at him.

He cried out, shielding his face with his hands, and backed away. She heard him cry again, in pain, as a greasy lump of broken-off machinery hit him in the chest. He staggered, trying to fend the blizzard away. Then a piece of cinder block caromed off the side of his head, and he fell down on his knees, holding his head. Two more large rocks struck his face and forehead, and he slumped over entirely.

Patience sighed, and the rain of trash subsided, pieces bouncing off the ground as they landed. Silence.

She gave the body one last look, and started to run again. Behind her, in the manufactory, and all along the outer fence line, the invisible gangers started to whoop and holler again.

I HAD JUST seen off a second assault by the slum-gangers when I felt the telekinetic burst. Fierce, unfocused, not too far away.

‘Turn west.’ I voxed.

‘Understood.’ Kara responded.

‘I read that.’ came Nayl. ‘I just heard bolter fire from that direction too.’

I slid through the ruins, my mind wide open. There were psi-traces all around me, at least a dozen as close as fifty metres. Most were the feral impulses of the hidden Dolors. But there. One other. Harder.

Two las-rounds struck the front of my chair and fizzled off harmlessly. I found the hunter as he was about to fire again, and picked him up. He yelled in fear as he left the ground, dragged up into the air ten metres, twenty. Then I let him go.

I didn’t even bother to watch him land. The sharp light of his mind went out abruptly.

‘I heard shots.’ Kara voxed. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine.’ I replied. ‘Kara, it is a game. An obscene hunting game. We have to find this girl, whatever she is, before they do.’

‘Understood. Absolutely.’

Kara was about a third of a kilometre away to my right.

‘I’ve got a drone active in your vicinity.’ Carl told her over the link.

Kara acknowledged, and glanced around. That was when the two hunters, twins clad in silver-grey skin sleeves, pounced. One pinned her arms from behind, the other came at her with a chain-fist. She rolled her body back, using the man pinning her as a back-brace, and bicycle-kicked the other in the face. He went over in the rubble, rolling.

But the man pinning Kara from behind rammed forward and headbutted her in the back of the skull.

+Kara!+

Even at that distance, I felt her pain and sensed that she had blacked out. They’d have her gutted before she could come round.

I knew I had no choice. I had to ware her. It wasn't something she – or anyone else I knew – enjoyed, but it was necessary. Besides, we had trained for this. Kara Swole was a particularly receptive candidate.

The wraithbone pendant around her neck lit up with psychic-energy. Kara's body suddenly animated again, but it was me moving her. I had taken her physical form over, put it on like a suit of clothes.

Blank-eyed, Kara's body twisted hard and broke the pinning hold. She tore clear, landed well, and swept out the legs of the hunter with the chain-fist so he went over on his backside.

Then she turned, raising a forearm block against the other's attack, following the block with two rapid jabs to his face and a side-stamp that caught and dislocated his right knee.

He howled in pain. Kara/I grabbed his flailing arms and swung him bodily around right into his partner, who was returning to the fight for the second time.

The partner's forward-thrust chain-fist, which had been sweeping at Kara/me met the ribs of his fellow hunter instead. The whirring bite-blades of the gauntlet weapon punched clean through the man's side in a shocking welter of blood and torn tissue. He screamed as he died, his whole body quivering in time to the rending vibrations of the glove's cycling blades.

His partner and accidental killer screamed too: in outrage and horror at what he had just done. He wrenched the glove out, but it was too late. His twin, a huge and awful excavation yawning in the side of his torso, stopped quivering and dropped. A film of blood covered everything in a five metre radius.

Berserk, the remaining hunter hurled himself at Kara/me. We leapt, boosted by a touch of telekinesis, and executed a perfect somersault over his head.

He swung around. But by then Kara/I had grabbed up her fallen riot gun. Her puppet hand racked the slide. A single, booming shot blew the hunter backwards eight metres.

We heard a sound behind us, and turned, bringing the pumpgun up.

‘Steady!’ Nayl warned.

‘What are you doing here?’ Kara/I demanded.

‘You were in trouble, Kara!’ he said. ‘I heard it over the vox. I came as fast as I could.’

‘What about the girl? What about the girl we’re looking for?’

Nayl shrugged. ‘Kara?’

‘No, it’s me, dammit!’ I said with Kara’s voice. ‘Catch her for Throne’s sake, I’m coming out.’

Nayl hurried forward and took Kara’s limp form into his arms as I ceased waring her. She was semiconscious, and the trauma of being a ware subject would leave her disorientated and sick for a good while.

+Guard her, Harlon. In fact, get her back to the transports.+

‘Where are you going?’ he asked the empty air.

+To find the girl.+

CLOSED BACK INTO the womb-like nowhere of my support chair, I impelled it forward again, trying to reacquire the raw psychic-pulse I’d felt before. I felt edgy. Having to ware someone was a curious thing to deal with, and the feelings always left me conflicted. I was aware that the subject loathed the sensation, and it was also most usually done in moments of extremis, involving violence and furious levels of adrenaline. But for me it was a brief delicious escape, a cruel reminder of what I had lost. I despised myself for deriving pleasure from such painful, demeaning moments.

+Carl?+

‘Yes, sir?’

+Do you have a fix on me?+

‘Yes, sir. I’ve got two more drone tracks about half a kilometre ahead, converging. Please hurry, sir.’

+I’m hurrying.+

Back in the gig, Carl looked up from his scanner displays, fidgeting with his cuffs nervously. He looked at Wystan, who was reading his dataslate again.

‘Don’t you care?’ Carl asked.

The untouchable nodded at his book. ‘It’s just getting interesting.’

Outside, DaRolle scurried forward, keeping low behind a half-fallen wall. He checked the area, unshipped his laspistol, and deactivated his limiter.

Then he began to run, head down, towards the parked transport.

XVII

HER BREATHING WAS coming in short, sharp bursts. Patience had run as hard and as fast as she could. There was at least one person very close to her now, but the psychic-trace was faint and hard to place. She was worn out, exhausted, and her gift was weak from over use.

She clambered down into a cavity behind a ruined pumping station, crawling into a cave formed by the overhang of the fallen roof. She curled up against the back wall, her arms around her knees. Outside, the Dolors were still jeering and shouting, but it was more distant now.

She’d gone as far as she could. Now it was just a matter of waiting. Waiting for the end.

+Patience.+

She started, and looked around, not daring to speak.

+Patience. Stay calm. Stay where you are. I’m coming to help you. I want to help you.+

‘Where are you?’ she hissed in fear.

+Don’t speak. They’ll hear you. Think your answers.+

‘What do you mean? Where the frig are you?’

+Don’t be scared. Try not to speak aloud. They’ll hear you.+

‘This is another trick. You’re one of them! One of the frigging hunters!’

+No. Patience, my name is Gideon. I swear by the God-Emperor himself I mean you no harm. I'm trying to help you. You're hearing me because I am speaking directly to your mind, psychically.+

'You lie!'

+Try me. Think of something I couldn't know.+

Patience closed her eyes and moaned softly.

+Prudence. And Providence.+

She gasped.

+Your sisters. You're worried about them. They were taken... wait... yes, they were taken from the scholam. Without your consent.+

'Just kill me, you bastard, or leave me alone!'

+Please, Patience, don't speak. They'll hear you.+

I was moving fast now. The jagged ruins of the slum-tracts slid by me on either side. Rocks and catapult bullets occasionally clattered off my chair's armour. Where was she? Where was she?

+Patience? Can you still hear me?+

'Leave me alone!' she sobbed, crawling deeper into the damp cavity. 'I can't do this! I can't do this any more!'

+Yes, you can! Just keep it together! Focus! Focus on something!+

Patience twisted in panic, clawing at the sides of her head. I was scaring her. My voice. Something about my voice. Not just the fact that it was coming, disembodied, into her mind. Something else.

What?

As I steered my chair out across a long sea of trash and debris, I gently peered into her mind, into the panic and turmoil. Into the fear.

I saw it. It was my voice itself. I sounded like a middle-aged, well-educated male. Reasonable, polite, refined. Exactly the sort of man who had betrayed her entire life, her fellow pupils, her sisters. I saw she had formed a picture of me already. It was part Cyrus, part Ide, part Loketter, part some ginger-haired man. It was all of these, blended into one monster.

Immediately, I switched the focus of my telepathy.

+Kara?+

I found her at once, bleary and sick. Nayl was helping her along a rubble ledge back towards the gig.

‘What?’ she asked.

+I’m sorry, Kara, but I need to ware you again.+

‘Throne, no!’ she whimpered.

‘She’s had enough, boss,’ Nayl said.

+It’s important Really important. I need her voice.+

Kara looked at Nayl and nodded wearily. He caught her as her wraithbone pendant flashed and she fell.

I left her body limp in Nayl’s arms, and put on her personality like a skin-suit. My psychic-voice became Kara Swole’s soft, reassuring tones.

+Patience?+

‘What? What?’

+Patience, my name is Kara. My good friend Gideon has asked me to talk to you. Time is very short, Patience, and you need to listen to me if you want to stay alive. Trust Gideon. Do exactly as I say.+

I could feel the girl giving way to panic.

+Patience, focus! Hold on! There must be something you can hold onto! Something you can hold onto so you can keep going! Your sisters, maybe? Your mother? Patience?+

She had found it at last. It was something so small and dark and hard in her mind that even my telepathy could not unlock it. She held onto it, tight, tight, as the dark closed in.

Her panic waned. Her breathing slowed. I was close now. I could reach her.

Patience opened her eyes. A skull, eyes bright, hovered at arm’s reach in front of her, gazing at her. A drone.

I was too late. She had made too much noise.

The hunters had found her.

XVIII

‘THRONE!’ CRIED CARL, leaning back from his auspex station in alarm. ‘What the hell did you do?’

‘I might have broken wind,’ admitted Wystan Frauka. ‘Sorry.’ He turned back to his book.

‘Check your limiter, dear boy,’ Thonius demanded.

‘Why?’

‘Why? I was just listening in, and Ravenor suddenly went off-line!’

‘The vox?’

‘The vox is still live! I mean his telepathic link just scrambled! Was that you?’

Wystan Frauka frowned and put down his data-slate. He checked his device. ‘No, it’s on. I’m blocked.’

‘Then what?’

‘Relax, Carly. I’ll take a look.’

‘Please—’ Carl began.

Frauka patted the handgun in his belt again. ‘I told you, I’ve got your back.’

‘No, it’s just... could you not call me “Carly”?’

Frauka frowned. ‘Okay. What about “Thony” then?’

‘No!’

Frauka held up his hands. ‘All right. Throne! I was just being pally. The boss said I was too aloof. Too aloof, can you believe it? He suggested I should try being more friendly. He said it would help with team building, and—’

‘Frigging hell, Frauka!’

‘What? Emperor’s tits, you guys are so uptight! I’ll go look! I’ll go look! I got your back, remember?’

Frauka turned. DaRolle’s laspistol was aimed directly at his face. The ginger-haired killer grinned.

‘On a side note.’ Frauka said, ‘it would have been nice if you’d got my back too, Carly.’

XIX

‘OUT!’ SAID THE hunter in grey-scale armour. He gestured with his double-bladed harn knife. Patience got up, and slowly came out of the pumping station cavity. The hunter’s drone circled her, purring softly.

‘Gonna fight?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘Good girl. Step out here.’

She came out.

The hunter keyed his vox-link. ‘This is Greyde. I’ve got her. Game’s done. Tell Loketter that my master Vevian will want his winnings in small bills, so he can pay me off nice and handsome.’

The hunter looked at Patience. ‘Why are you smiling?’

‘No reason.’

He settled his grip on the alien blade. ‘Sure you’re not thinking of trying something dumb? I’d hate that. It’d make me take a lot longer with you.’

‘I won’t fight,’ Patience said.

‘Good.’

‘Because Kara told me I didn’t have to any more.’

‘Who? Who’s Kara?’

‘The girl who told me her friend was coming. She told me to have patience, because patience is a virtue.’

The hunter, Greyde, looked around edgily. ‘No one here but us, girl. No sign of any friend of yours.’

Patience shrugged. ‘He’s coming.’

A wind picked up, stirring the dust and the grit around them, billowing the filth up in swirling clouds. Like an exhalation from the sumps of the towering city.

Except it wasn't.

Larger pieces of trash lifted and fluttered through the air. Pebbles rolled on the ground. It was like a hurricane was gathering over the slums.

No hurricane.

Alarmed, Greyde grabbed the girl, viced her neck with one powerful arm, and raised the harn blade to deliver the kill-stab.

+Kuming Greyde. I know you. I know everything about you. I know the nine counts of murder that you are wanted for, and the fifty-seven other killings you have on your clammy soul. I know you killed your own father. I know you understand only hard cash and killing.+

'What? What?' the hunter wailed in terror as the tempest of wind engulfed him and his prey.

+I don't carry cash. No pockets. I guess it's going to be killing then.+

I turned on my chair's stablights, so I became visible as I ploughed in through the tumult of dirt and dust. The hunter screamed, but the dust choked him. Gaggling, he threw Patience aside, and drew his Etva III plasma cannon, a pistol-sized weapon more than capable of burning clean through my armoured chair.

Staggering, half-blinded, he aimed it at me.

With a simple tap of my mind, I fired my chair's psi-cannon. The hunter's corpse slammed back through the wall of the pumping station. Even before it had hit the wall, every bone in that body had been pulped by concussive force, every organ exploded.

The wind dropped. Grit pattered off the sealed body of my chair.

+Patience?+

She got up. I wasn't using Kara Swole's voice any more.

+Are you all right?+

She nodded. She was singularly beautiful, despite the dirt caking her and the tears in her clothing. Tall, slender, black-haired, her eyes a piercing green.

'Are you Kara's friend?' she asked.

+Yes.+

‘Are you Gideon?’

+Yes.+

She stepped forward, and placed her right hand flat on the warm canopy of my support chair. ‘Good. You don’t look anything like I imagined.’

XX

‘SO, WE’RE DEAD? Yeah, of course we are.’ Frauka said softly.

‘You’d be dead already,’ replied DaRolle. ‘I just wanted to find out which bastard was running you. Who is it? Finxster? Rotash? That’d be right. Rotash always wants a slice of the boss’s game-play.’

‘Neither, actually,’ Frauka smiled.

‘Frauka...’ Carl began, terrified. He’d backed away as far as the gig’s scan-console would allow, and even then knew there was no hope. This killer had them both cold. Carl wondered where he’d left his weapon. The answer – ‘in the cabin lockers’ – did not cheer him up.

‘Who, then?’

‘You won’t know him. His name’s Ravenor.’

DaRolle sniffed. ‘Never heard of the frig.’

‘Untouchable?’ Frauka asked, casually indicating the limiter around DaRolle’s throat.

‘Uh huh. You too?’

Frauka smiled. ‘Made that way, so help me. Still, the pay’s decent. Always someone who needs a good blunter, right?’

‘I hear that.’ DaRolle grinned.

‘Oh well.’ Frauka sighed. ‘Do me a favour, okay? Make it clean and quick. Back of the head, no warning.’

‘Sure.’

‘I mean, one blunter doing a favour for another? We gotta stick together, right, even if we are working for rival crews?’

‘No problem.’ said DaRolle.

‘Okay.’ Frauka said, and turned his back. ‘Any time you like.’

DaRolle aimed his pistol again.

‘I don’t suppose...’ Frauka began. Then he shook his head. ‘No, I’m taking the piss now.’

‘What?’ asked DaRolle.

‘Yeah, what?’ Carl squeaked in frozen terror.

‘One last stick? For a condemned man?’

DaRolle shrugged. ‘Go on.’

Frauka took out his lack, set a lho-stick to his lips and lit it with his igniter. He breathed in the smoke and smiled. ‘Oh, tastes good. Real mellow. Want one?’

‘No.’ said DaRolle.

‘Real smooth.’ said Frauka, inhaling a long drag. ‘These things’ll kill you, you know.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about that.’ DaRolle smiled.

‘I don’t frigging believe this!’ Carl whined.

‘Hey.’ said Frauka, glancing over his shoulder. ‘Why don’t you do him now while I’m smoking this baby? Save time. I never did like him.’

‘Oh Throne!’ Carl cried out and fell into a foetal position under the console.

‘Frig, what a baby!’ DaRolle laughed.

‘Tell me about it.’ Frauka said. He stubbed out his smoke. ‘Okay, ready.’ He held up the squashed butt. ‘Know what that was, my friend?’

‘Don’t tell me.’ smirked DaRolle. ‘Best smoke of your life?’

‘No.’ said Frauka quietly. ‘It was delaying tactics.’

DaRolle swung round. The hulking shape of Harlon Nayl filled the hatch behind him. Nayl’s Hecuter 10 boomed once.

‘Everyone alive?’ Nayl asked, stepping in over the twisted body of the ginger-haired man.

‘Saw you approaching on the scanners.’ Frauka said. ‘Thought I’d keep him talking.’

Carl Thonius got to his feet, shivering with anger and fright. ‘You’re unbelievable, Frauka.’ he hissed.

‘Thank you, Carl.’ Frauka smiled, and sat down with his book again. ‘See? Now you’re team building too.’

XXI

I LED THE GIRL back to the gig, where the others were waiting.

‘Hello, Patience, I’m Kara.’ Kara said.

‘Good to know you,’ Patience replied.

By the time we raided Loketter’s manse, backed up by a full squad of magistratum troopers, the narcobaron and his cronies had cleared out. There are warrants out for all of them. I understand Loketter is still on the run.

We returned to the Kindred Youth Scholam, and resumed the interrogations. It took several weeks, but by the end of it, I’d wrung some precious facts out of Cyrus and his staff.

There wasn’t much. No, that’s a lie. There was enough to ensure that Cyrus would face further interrogation at the Inquisition facility on Thracian Primaris, and enough to make sure the scholam’s tutors and rigorists would remain incarcerated in the penitentiaries of Urbitane for the rest of their natural lives.

And a lead. Not much, but a start. From Cyrus, just before his mind finally snapped, I learned that Molotch was heading for the outworlds. Sleef, perhaps. Maybe even deeper than that. I instructed Nayl and Kara to provision for what could be a long, dangerous pursuit.

The day before we were due to leave Sameter, I met with Carl in one of the scholam’s old, faded classrooms. Most of the staff had been shipped out by then, in magistratum custody.

‘Did you trace what I wanted?’ I asked.

He nodded. 'It's very little. With the records wiped—'

'What have you got?'

'Pupils Prudence and Providence were sold to a free trader who called himself Vinquies. The name was false, of course. No other records remain, and the name doesn't match any excise log I can get from Sameter Out Traffic.'

'The man himself?'

'There was a picture in Cyrus's mind, and in the minds of several of the other tutors present at the supper, but they're not reliable. I've fed them through both the local magistratum files and the officio itself. Nothing.'

'So... so, they're lost?'

Carl nodded sadly. 'I suppose, if we dedicated the rest of our careers to trying to find them, we might turn up some clue. But in all reality, they're long gone.'

'I'll tell her.' I said, and slid out of the room.

Patience was in the oubliette. By choice. The hatch was open. She sat inside, in the semi-dark, sliding her hands over the stones. She was still wearing her torn and filthy uniform. She'd refused to take it off.

'Patience?'

She stared out at me. 'You can't find them, can you?'

I thought for a moment, and decided it was better to lie. Better a lie now than a lifetime of hopeless yearning.

'Yes, Patience, I found them.'

'They're dead, aren't they?'

'Yes.'

She coiled up, and I felt her hold onto that small black nugget in her mind again.

+Patience.+

'Yes, Gideon?'

+I'm sorry. I truly am. We have to leave soon. I'd like you to come with us.+

‘With you? Why?’

+I’ll be honest. I can’t leave you here. You know about your gift? What it means?+

‘Yes.’

+You’re a psyker. A telekine. You can’t be allowed to remain in public. But I can look after you. I can train you. You could come to serve the God-Emperor of Mankind at my side. Would you like that?+

‘Better than an apprenticeship to a mill.’ she said. ‘Will Kara be there?’

+Yes, Patience.+

‘All right then.’ she said, and stepped out of the oubliette to join me.

+If you follow me, it will be hard at times. I will demand a lot of you. I will need to know everything about you. What do you think to that?+

‘That’s fine, Gideon.’

+I’ll be asking you questions, probing you, training your gift, unwrapping who you are.+

‘I understand.’

+Do you? Here’s a test question, the sort of thing I’ll be asking you. What was it that you held on to? When the hunters were closing. I felt it as a dark secret part of you, something you wouldn’t let go.+

‘It was my name, Gideon.’ she said. ‘My true name, my real name. It was always the single thing my mother gave me that I didn’t ever give away to the bastards in this place.’

+I see. That makes sense. Good, thank you for being so honest.+

+Gideon, do you want me to tell you my real name? I will, if you want.+

‘No.’ I said. ‘No, not now, not ever. I want you to hold onto it. It’s your secret. Keep it safe and it will keep you sane. It’ll remind you what you’ve come through. Promise me you’ll keep it safe.’

+I will.+

‘Patience is a fine name. I’ll call you that.’

‘All right.’ she replied, and started to walk down the hallway at my side.

‘I’ll need a surname, though.’ she said at length.

‘Choose one.’ I replied.

She looked down at the monogram embroidered on her ragged scholam-issue clothes.

‘Kys?’ she suggested. ‘I’ll be Patience Kys.’

RAVENOR ROGUE

‘To have faith is to have purpose, and purpose in life is what defines a man, and makes him steadfast and resolute. Faith keeps him true and, even in the darkest hours, illuminates him like a candle flame. Faith guides him surely, from birth to the grave. It shows him the path, and prevents him from straying into the lightless thickets where insanity awaits. To lose faith is to lose purpose, and to be bereft of guidance. For a man without faith will no longer be true, and a mind without purpose will walk in dark places.’

— The Spheres of Longing, II. ix. 31.

‘Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.’

— Ancient human adage.



THEN

Sleef Outworld, 336.M41

IT WAS ALL over. Ordion's scheme was in tatters. All that mattered now was survival.

'Don't make me kill you,' the bounty hunter ordered. He was standing ten metres away and had a gun aimed at Zygmunt Molotch's face. The bounty hunter was formidably large and shaven-headed. His powerful body was packed into a matt-black bodyglove. He had been sent to watch the back steps into the upper vents.

'Oh, please! Don't!' Molotch cried, and sank to his knees in the sulphurous dust. *Loki*, he decided instantly. That was the man's accent. Loki, the freeze-world. That meant tough, no quarter. Best of the best.

No surprise that their opponent would employ the best of the best.

Keeping the big handgun aimed at Molotch's head, the bounty hunter came forward. Molotch could hear his approaching footsteps crunching the sand. *That's it, close the distance. Ten metres is no use to me. Arm's length will make us equal, gun or no gun.*

'Identify yourself,' the bounty hunter commanded.

'My name is Satis,' Molotch replied. He dropped his voice a tone and a half, and affected the nasal twang of southshore Sameter. 'I'm a flier, just a flier, sir!' He whimpered slightly, for effect, trusting that the Fliers' Guild jacket he had dragged off a corpse five minutes earlier would back up his story.

'Are you armed?'

'No, sir, indeed I am not!'

The edge of the bounty hunter's shadow fell across him, cast by the lurid flames spewing up out of the vents. *One step closer, just another step.*

'Nayl?' a voice called out; a woman's voice, thickly accented.

Molotch tensed. Peering up, he saw a second person approaching. Saw her feet, anyway. Leather armour, tight-lashed. A particular loop-in-loop detailing to the hide work decoration. That and the accent added together to make a Carthaen swordswoman. Best of the best, once again.

'Just kill him,' said the woman.

'Wait,' replied the bounty hunter. Molotch heard him adjust his vox-link. 'Iron wishes Thorn, by heartbeat, dark after dusk. Petals scattered, abundant. Teal sky. Closed shells, whispering dogs adjacent. Pattern delta?'

'Query adjacent dogs. The centre of the ripple, spreading.'

'A thaw. Idiot mouths,' the bounty hunter replied. 'Pattern delta?' he asked again.

'Pattern denied. Pattern silver.'

Some informal code. It was fascinating to hear. Molotch divined the principles quickly. He'd always had a talent for languages. His opponent was instructing the bounty hunter to keep Molotch alive, pending interview. The bounty hunter – Nayl, it seemed his name was – was leaning towards Molotch's claim to be just a hapless accomplice to the day's events.

'Pattern confirmed.'

'Look at me.' the woman said. Molotch eagerly wanted to, but he was in character, and his character was timid and scared. He kept his head bowed and mewed a sob.

The bounty hunter hoisted Molotch back onto his feet. His grip was astonishingly strong. Molotch found himself facing the bounty hunter – Nayl – and the swordswoman. She was typical of her breed: taller than most grown men, almost Astartes height, but slender, her hair tight braided, her body cased in leather armour, a tasselled cloak flapping out

like wings in the wind. Every centimetre of her tight armour and her cloak was ritually decorated with scrollwork, knotting and bronze studs.

She was the most beautiful thing Molotch had ever seen, and he instantly decided he had to kill her.

She had a sword in her hands, clenched firmly as if it was feather light and about to fly away on the mountain wind. It was a sabre of extraordinary length, two-thirds as tall as she was. The blue cast of the metal told Molotch it had been folded eighteen or nineteen times, which was typical of ancient Carthaen metalwork, and indicated it was a masterpiece weapon, a priceless antique and, very likely, a psychic blade. The oldest Carthaen steels all were. That meant the woman and the sword were united in sentience. Yes, he could see it quiver ever so slightly in time with her breathing.

‘You are a flier?’ she asked, staring down at him.

Molotch made sure the fear remained in his eyes, even though all that was really there was desire. He was captivated. She was extraordinary, a goddess. He wanted to possess her. He wanted to hear her cry out his name in that delicious outworld accent as she died.

‘I am a flier, indeed,’ he replied. Tone and accent. Tone and accent.

‘You were hired?’

‘Just for conveyance. It was a legal contract of hire.’

‘Leave him alone.’ the bounty hunter said. ‘There’ll be time for that later.’ He was studying the vents above them, watching the glow of the plasma fires light up the sky.

The woman’s brow furrowed. ‘Barbarisater thirsts.’ she said. ‘He is not what he seems.’

She was good. She’d seen something, or the sword had smelled something. He longed to know what it was, so he could correct it next time. Accent? Body language? It wasn’t the time to ask. The bounty hunter was turning back to face him. Molotch knew he was about to be afforded a one or possibly two-second window of opportunity, and that was all, and if he missed it, he would be dead. He had to swerve the initiative, quickly.

‘Who are you?’ he asked suddenly. The bounty hunter blinked in surprise.

‘I need to know who you are,’ Molotch said, more urgently.

‘Shut it!’ Nayl said.

‘I just don’t know what’s going on,’ Molotch whined.

‘Better you don’t,’ Nayl replied and glanced at the woman. ‘Cover him while I search him for weapons, Arianhrod.’

Arianhrod. Nayl. Now he had both their names.

The woman nodded, and swept the sword around in a high guard that Molotch was fairly sure was called the *ehn kulsar*. She held it there. Over her shoulder, the vents boomed again.

Nayl reached forward. When he’d been down on his knees, Molotch had picked one of the heavy brass buttons off the cuff of the flier’s coat and palmed it. He fired it with a flick of his index finger up into Nayl’s left eye.

Nayl cursed and jerked backwards. Molotch sprang past him, hooking his toe behind the bounty hunter’s calf to turn the stagger into an outright fall. The woman was already moving, the sabre lunging.

‘Arianhrod,’ Molotch said, using the tone of command.

She hesitated. A hesitation was all he was ever going to get out of a Carthaen swordswoman, especially as he didn’t know her full clan name. But it was enough. A momentary wrong-foot. He chopped the edge of his hand into her neck between the lip of her armour’s collar and her braided hair. The muscles in her left shoulder went into involuntary spasm. As she recoiled in surprise, he lifted the sabre out of her hands.

It was like taking hold of the choke chain of an attack dog. The sabre fought him. It didn’t want his touch. It pulled like the reins of a bolting steed. Molotch knew he had absolutely no hope of mastering it. Instead, he let it pull away from him like a kite in a gale.

Straight into the bounty hunter.

Nayl had just recovered from his stumble, and was pouncing to snap Molotch’s neck. The Carthaen sabre impaled itself through his belly before

he even saw it.

The bounty hunter made a soft sound, like a *tut* of disappointment. There was surprisingly little blood, even when he slid off the blade. It was so sharp that the lips of the wounds it had cut through flesh and bodyglove closed tight again, sealed along perfect incisions.

Nayl hit the dust, and lay there, one knee bent, his back arched. Molotch let go of the sabre and set it free. It flew away as if he'd thrown it. He didn't bother to see where it fell. The woman was a more pressing concern.

She uttered no words or curses as she came at him, which seemed remarkably restrained. Molotch wondered just how many tenets of the *Ewl Wyla Scryi* he had just dishonoured by taking her blade from her and using it on her comrade. A seven-fold shame, he estimated. He'd spare her the drudge of penance and mortification by killing her.

Someone had trained her well. He barely avoided a two-finger jab that came at him like the blade of a chisel, and deflected the iron-hard edge of her other hand with a brush of his forearm. She pivoted, and swept around with her left leg – so long and shapely! – and he had to swing out with his hips, arms raised like a dancer, in order to miss it. Her weight came over onto her left leg as it landed, and she swung the right leg out after it, backwards, wheeling herself into the air.

This time, the flying right toecap almost connected. Molotch flopped right back at the waist, dropping his chin into his collarbone to minimise the profile of his face, and converted his body's downward progress into a spring off his right hand that flipped him behind her as she landed.

Aware of him, she back-jabbed with her right elbow to crack his jaw. He stopped her elbow with the cup of his right hand – an impact hard enough to sting his palm – and drove his left fist in under her armpit with the middle finger extended like a beak.

She yowled and lurched away. He'd been studying her intricate body armour, the patterns of bronze studs, the leather ridges, the knot work. All designed to deflect a blade. Simple, very effective. When you fought a

sword, the last thing you wanted to take was a scratch that would bleed you to weakness or death. All but the truest killing thrusts could be turned by her armour's complex surface.

But a fist wasn't a blade edge. A hand wasn't a sword. A cluster of bronze studs placed perfectly to glance away a cut to the ribs simply provided a target for a beaked fist. They as good as marked out the mid axillary line, and that governed the autonomic supply to the heart.

She tried to turn, but she was hurt and, besides, he was enjoying himself too much. He kicked her in the back of the left knee, and met her falling body with the heel of his left hand, striking the sacral plexus and flaring pain through her pelvis and legs.

She screamed. She was strong, three or four times as strong as him. She tore away and tried to roll clear. Having exploited the disadvantages of her armour, Molotch turned his attention to her cloak. Who but a barbarian fought in a cloak?

He grabbed it, and pulled with both arms as he simultaneously raised his left leg in a sidekick. Arianhrod snapped backwards, throttled by her cloak-clasp, and the back of her head slammed into his kicking foot.

She was done.

The urge to linger and kill her was immense, but there was no time to relish it. No time to explore a truly complex death. Pleasure could wait. All that mattered was survival.

Molotch started up the rock-cut stairs into the cliff. The smell of the vents was pungent. Clouds of miasmal gas fogged the air. It was hot. He began to move more quickly, and took off the borrowed jacket, throwing it aside.

He was already making mental notes and annotations. The Cognitae trained a man to recognise defeat or failure the moment it happened, and to be empowered by that knowledge. Men are often crippled or undone by the prospect of defeat, and that makes them vulnerable. A Cognitae was never vulnerable unless he chose to make himself so.

A defeat was something to be identified, analysed and used. A defeat was a springboard to launch a man onwards. That was what Madam Chase had taught them. Schemes failed. Plans came apart. Nothing happened with dead certainty. But men only perished when they allowed themselves the weakness of disappointment or maudlin regret.

A waste of effort, when the effort expended on regret could be put to much better use.

Clinical, precise, his mind calculated. Next time, he would plan scrupulously, because next time, he would be in charge. Ordion had been a flawed choice as leader. Molotch had only gone along with it because there was a matter of seniority to be respected. Ordion was twelve years his senior; Molotch a new, unproven graduate. No matter his extraordinary achievements as a student – extraordinary even in a school of extraordinarily able souls – Molotch was still obliged to wait his turn. He fancied Chase had appointed him to Ordion's team to keep an eye on the venture.

In which case, he had failed. The plan was ruined and Ordion was dead. The others too, as far as Molotch knew. He should have acted the moment Ordion started to lose perspective. Those little decisions, for instance, early on, that Molotch had disagreed with. He should have acted. He should have taken the initiative and confronted Ordion. If necessary, he should have killed Ordion and replaced him.

These things he was now learning. Do not rely on a leader. Be your own leader. And, as leader, do not rely on your subordinates to check your actions, for they may well be guilty of the first sin.

Next time, these things would be corrected.

All that remained to do was to make sure there was a next time.

He reached the upper levels of the crags. The limestone cliffs curved away beneath him like old, yellow bone. Far below, in the gnarled landscape of the lower vents, he could see the smudgy outline of their base camp. The gnosis engines were down there still, unless the inquisitors had smashed them; so tantalisingly within reach, so precious, even though they

had barely half-loaded them to capacity. The vents had spoken much more slowly than Ordion had predicted. Two weeks, Ordion had estimated, followed by a return trip to Sarum with at least two if not three engines ripe and ready for use. But they had been on Sleaf three months, more than enough time for the agencies of the Throne to track them, corner them, and bring them down.

The pale blue air shimmered with heat haze. The vents erupted periodically, boiling vast tides of super-hot plasmatic flow up from the planet's ugly heart. They'd timed their visit to coincide with an eruptive period. The voices were said to be louder and more talkative at such times. Now, it seemed as if the plasma vents were booming and lighting up the sky in sympathy with the afternoon's violence.

Yellow smoke trickled back across the cliff top. Rock waste from the last surge pattered off the crags and skittered down the steeper drops. He could taste the hot stench in his mouth.

He paused by a large, ovoid boulder and took his link out of his pocket.

'Are you still there?' he asked.

'Who is this? Ordion?'

'It's Molotch. Everyone's dead. It's time to leave, *Oktober Country*, before they find you in parking orbit.'

'We appreciate the tip.'

'Don't think you're going without me,' Molotch said.

'Of course.' A pause. 'We'll do our best. Are you near transport?'

'No. Fire up the teleport and lock onto my signal.'

'The teleport's too valuable to risk—'

'I'm too valuable to leave here, you bastards. Fire it up.'

'Molotch, I'm telling you, the vents are in flare. That activity is going to play hell with the teleport. Maybe even fry it, and that's if we get a fix.'

'That's why I headed for high ground, to make it easy for you. I'm right up on the cliffs. Lock onto my signal.'

'Move around. Into the open. Hurry.'

Molotch moved out from beside the rock. Plasma heat and the sunlight stung his face. The wind caught his hair. Holding the link out, he clambered up the rocks until he was overlooking two of the main vents. He walked to the edge of one. Plasma bloomed in bright clouds from the crags a couple of kilometres west. It would be another five minutes until a surge came here again.

He looked down. The drop was immense. The terror was stimulating. Such a long way down, a long drop, it seemed, into the bowels of hell. The vent was forty metres in diameter, its walls scorched black and smoking, and it fell away for thousands of metres, straight down. Far below, there was a glimmer of light as the flames began to rise again.

‘Hurry up,’ Molotch said.

‘We’re getting it,’ the vox crackled.

Hot, sulphurous gas billowed up out of the vent, and Molotch turned aside, wrinkling his nose. The rock underneath him was rumbling, vibrating with the deep subterranean pressure. The boom and flash of venting lit up along the far crags.

‘Come on!’

‘Getting a fix now. We’ve fixed your signal. We’re just...’

‘Oktober Country?’

A hesitation. ‘Molotch, confirm which bio-sign you are.’ Molotch didn’t answer. He swept around. The man facing him had almost got the drop on him. Very stealthy, very clever.

But he’d made one crucial mistake. He’d tried to take Molotch alive.

Molotch made a flicking gesture with his right arm. It was unexpected and subliminally fast, but so ridiculously obvious, it shouldn’t have worked. Except that, as with all things, Molotch had practised it to the point of obsession.

The flick knocked the man’s laspistol up out of his hand into the air. The man looked honestly surprised to be disarmed so foolishly, but he was far from defenceless. He was a psyker, a strong one. Molotch could feel it.

Only the hexagrammic wards tattooed on Molotch's scalp under the hairline were keeping the man's mind at bay.

Molotch threw himself full length and caught the tumbling laspistol in his outstretched hand. He rolled on the rock to fire it, but the man had landed on top of him, forcing the hand holding the gun up and to the side. They were face to face, like lovers, for a moment. Molotch saw the man's sculptural, high cheek-boned face, his long black hair tied back, the set to his eyes that was noble and faintly reminiscent of the eldar.

With supreme effort, the veins in his neck bulging, Molotch slowly dragged the hand holding the gun back towards the man's head. The man grunted, trying to keep the arm bent away. Molotch pushed harder.

The man head butted Molotch squarely in the face and broke his nose. Molotch winced in pain, and felt the blood stream down his cheeks. His effort relaxed involuntarily. The man clubbed Molotch's hand against the ground until the fingers broke and the gun fell out of them. Molotch gasped, hurt and furious. He threw a hasty left-hand jab that caught his adversary in the neck. It shifted the man's weight off Molotch's legs, but in delivering the jab, Molotch lost his grip on his link. The small, flat, golden device clattered away across the ivory rocks.

He could hear the shipmaster's tinny voice croaking from the speaker. 'Molotch? Molotch?'

Molotch pulled himself away from his foe, scrambling after the link. It was right on the rim of the vent. Gas was jetting up from the chasm. The ground was shaking more than before.

Sprawling on his belly, Molotch stretched for the link, but the hand his enemy had smashed against the rocks was useless and the fingers refused to close or grip. Molotch rolled, grabbing at the link with his left hand.

His scalp began to smoulder. The oppressive weight of psychic power was burning out the tattooed wards, turning them into bloody welts. In another few seconds, they would be gone and he would be open to the man's mind.

He grabbed the link, and struggled to his feet, shouting into it. 'Now. Now!'

His back was to the vent. The man was facing him. He'd retrieved his pistol and was aiming it at Molotch. No chances this time, no mistakes. The aim was square, the distance between them too great for Molotch to repeat his flicking trick.

'Enough,' the man said. 'Drop the link. I want you alive, but not that much.'

Molotch raised his hands slowly, but he did not drop the link. He smiled at the man and shook his head.

'Now!'

He stepped backwards off the rim.

He heard the man cry out in dismay. Then he was falling, head over heels, down and down into the deep, blackened pit, into the exhaling heat, into hell.

He screamed the shipmaster's name one final time, fighting to keep his grip on the link.

He saw the plasma flare surging up to meet him. A rising fireball of blossoming yellow and green. He felt his hair singe. He was falling into it and it was rising to engulf him, to devour him, a searing, white wall of—

THE PLASMA FLARE boomed up out of the vents, and trembled the rocks. Heat wash licked back across the crag top. The inferno withdrew, and revealed the man, standing beside the rim. He had encased himself in a cone of frigid air, and held it there as the flare erupted around him. He had no wish to be burned away to nothing.

It had been close. If the flare had lasted a few moments longer, his psychic shield would have failed.

He turned. Arianhrod Esw Sweydry was limping towards him. There was pain in her face. The man embraced her and kissed her mouth.

'Nayl?' he asked.

'He's bad. I don't think—'

The man activated his link. 'Talon wishes thorn, the colour of winter. Suppliant idol, with grace, reclining.'

‘Commencing.’

A moment later, they both heard the rising whine of the gun cutter’s engines echoing around the valley. ‘It’s all right, they’re on their way,’ the man told Arianhrod. ‘Besides, we got the last of them. The one who did it.’

‘Are you sure?’ she asked.

Gideon Ravenor glanced at the smoking vent. ‘Pretty damn sure.’ he said.



NOW

Tancred, Angelus subsector, 404.M41

I CAN'T IGNORE them much longer. I'll have to speak to them. I've been blanking their polite messages for six months, and their stern demands for two. It is tiresome, but if I intend to carry on as an inquisitor of the holy Inquisition, I must make time for them. One can be on Special Condition for only so long.

I sit by the window and look out across the towers and high walls of Basteen, Tancred's principal city. I do not need the window to see it. I feel it. I am much less than a man and much more.

My mind inhales the city. Basteen is basking under a lazy yellow sky. The sun is a molten ball. Red stone, red brick, and red tiles soak in the heat. I feel the sunlight on my soul. I smell the enduring, intricate, feudal character of Basteen: ink and steel pins, silk, wax, obscura smoke, veils and screens, jet shadows and scalding light. The city is rambling and convoluted, a Byzantine network of streets, alleys and buildings wound around and over one another with no discernable pattern or plan, no symmetry or scheme. Cadizky would have abhorred it.

My mind wanders the winding lanes, passing between the cool shadows of overhung alleys into small courts and squares where the sunlight lies on the flagstones in glaring white panels. A trader, in the shaded gloom of his premises, clacks an abacus as he makes up his ledger. A food vendor snores under his stove barrow. The barrow's oven is unlit.

No one purchases hot pastries in the heat of noon. It is time to rest before the brisk business of the evening.

Over here, a housekeeper steps home to her master's mansion from the wash-house, a basket of damp linen on her head. She is wondering if she dares stop to take a glass of caffeine, but is fearful that the sun will dry the linen stale and creased if she does not get it hung up. Passing her, coming up the street, are two boys with a pet simivulpa on a string. They are laughing at a joke that I analyse but fail to understand. Here, a servitor paints a door. The servitor's mind is empty, like an unused attic. Over there, an inker hurries to his next appointment, his wooden case of dyes and pens knocking against his hip. He is tired from a morning transcribing deeds that covered an entire shoulder blade.

Behind that wall, a cook dices root vegetables for a slow-braised stew. On a nearby chopping board, the three fish she bought at the dawn market lie, waiting to be cleaned and portioned. They look like three silver ingots. Behind that wall, a secret garden of fig trees, just four metres by four, a tiny pocket of green between high walled residences. Its owner looks down on it from his unshuttered windows, and covets it, and knows that no one else knows it is there. On a roof terrace, a young man plays a viol in the sun while his lover, another young man, sits in the shade of an awning and learns lines for his part in a play. In a cool basement lounge, a woman hesitantly questions a visiting physician about her aunt's dementia.

There, a girl and a boy make love for the first time. There, an ageing thief wakes up and takes a drink to steady his nerves. There, an ecclesiarch's servant scrapes wax from the temple candlesticks. There, a visiting businessman, late for his appointment, realises he has taken a wrong turn, and hurries back down the street the way he came. There, a woman sews. There, a man wonders how he's going to explain it to his wife.

There, a man worries how the meeting to renew his employment contract will go at five, not realising that he won't make the meeting because a heart attack is going to kill him, quite suddenly, in twenty-six minutes.

And somewhere out there...

I cast my mind wider. Forty streets, fifty, a radius of two kilometres... five. Thousands of minds, thousands of lives, twittering on, en masse but

individual, lit up to me like the stars in the heavens: some hot, some cool, some clever, some stupid, some promising, some doomed, all contained within the warren of red stone, red brick and red tiles, soaking in the heat.

And not one of them Zygmunt Molotch.

I know he's here. I can't taste him, or breathe him, or sense even an afterthought of him, but I know. I can't say why. I won't be able to tell the envoys why either, when I finally decide to stop ignoring them. But this is where he's hiding. Six months, faint leads, false trails, and here is where I'm drawn to. I have been a servant of the Inquisition since 332, and an autonomous inquisitor since 346. A long time. Long enough to be confident that I am good at what I do. I have faith. Or am I just obsessing?

The nagging idea that I have been fooling myself has come and gone with increasing regularity these last few weeks. The others feel it, I know. I see it in their faces. They're tired and frustrated with my quest.

I rein back my mind, and pull it in like a trawler's nets until it covers only the house around me. A leased residence, red brick built, well made. Three floors, a grand walled courtyard, a well. There's Patience Kys, my telekine, reclining on a stone bench in the covered walk. She has the plays of Clokus open on her lap, a first folio, but inside it is a copy of my early work, *The Mirror of Smoke*. She doesn't want me to know that she's been reading it. She is too embarrassed to admit she likes what I composed. I am too embarrassed to admit I know, and that I am flattered.

In the yard, there's Sholto Unwerth, my erstwhile shipmaster, and his elquon manhound, Fyflank. Fyflank is throwing a ball for the little man to chase. Shouldn't that be the other way around?

Overlooking the yard, Harlon Nayl thinks the same thing. He's laughing at the antics as he cleans the mechanism of an autopistol on a small desk. I hear him call out 'Look at this, now!' to Maud Plyton, and she gets up from the bowl of salad she was eating and comes to join him, munching, wiping her mouth. She laughs too. It's a deep, dirty snort. I like Maud. I'm glad she left the Magistratum of Eustis Majoris to come with me in the

service of the ordos. I have hopes for her. She's as canny as Kara and, I suspect, every bit as tough as Nayl.

Where's Kara? Not in the library. That's Carl Thonius's domain. He's working at his cogitator, winnowing down the latest crop of leads I fed him. He's changed a lot, these last few years. Since Flint, I suppose. The prissiness has gone. He's hard now, like glass, almost unreadable in his determination and reserve. He's dressing differently, behaving differently. He looks Kys and Nayl in the eye these days, and gives as good as he gets. I doubt it will be long before Interrogator Thonius is ready for his next career step. I'll sponsor him, without question. Inquisitor Thonius. It will suit him. I will miss him.

I find Kara Swole, in the rear bedroom. I look away again instantly. Belknap is with her. The moment they are sharing is... intimate. I have no wish or right to intrude.

Belknap, the medicae, is a useful addition to my party, though his manner of joining was improvised. He's a good man, fiercely religious, wonderfully skilled. He came to us when we needed a doctor to tend Kara, and stayed, I think, through love for her. They make a pretty pair. He makes her happy. I question his resolve: such a devout, centred man might not condone some of the things that an inquisitor and his party are forced to do.

I worry about Kara. There is a guarded quality to her, a guarded quality and an unspoken need, and it's been there since we were billeted in the house called Miserimus, in the ninth ward of Formal E, Petropolis. She was hurt and we needed a doctor to save her. I don't like to pry, and I don't like to rifle through the minds of my friends without their consent, but she's hiding something from me. A heavy secret.

I can guess what it is. She wants to leave. An inquisitor can only hold on to his followers for so long. Death is the most usual end to service, I'm sorry to say, but there are other circumstances: disenchantment, incompatibility, fatigue. With Kara, it's fatigue. Kara Swole has served me loyally for a long time and, before that, served my master, Gregor. She has

been nothing but a credit, and has nothing left to prove. Tchaikov's vampiric blade almost killed her, and that gave her pause. Then Patrik Belknap came along, her literal saviour, and brought the prospect of a viably different lifetime commitment with him. She wants to live. She wants to live a life where hazard is not a daily expectation. She wants to step back from the duty, her duty done, and embrace the ordinary, miraculous world of love and parenting and, I wager, grand-parenting.

I don't resent that. In moments of private despair, I yearn hopelessly for the same thing myself, truth be told. She's done her part, done more than the Emperor himself could have expected of a no-prospects dancer-acrobat from Bonaventure. I wish her that happiness, and delight in the fact that now, for a brief moment, she has the opportunity to seize it. That opportunity won't last, once we get going again. It's now, or, I fear, never. I just wish she'd decide. I wish she'd pluck up the courage and tell me. I won't rant or sulk or try to change her mind. She knows me better. I will give her my blessing, heartfelt. An inquisitor seldom gets that privilege.

That said, I won't suggest it to her either. She's too good to lose. She has to tell me herself, in her own time. This is, I suppose, petulant and controlling of me. I make no apologies. I am an Imperial inquisitor. Gregor Eisenhorn taught me this control, and I can't change the way I am.

Emperor knows, I'd love to.

There are two other people in the house with us.

I roll my support chair away from the window and coast across the floor of the room. The armoured chair is dark-matt, ominous, sleek, suspended and propelled by the ever-turning grav hoop's whispering hum. I have lived inside it, essentially bodiless, for almost seventy years, since that day at the Spatian Gate, that day of hideous alchemy when triumph changed to atrocity, and I changed from an able, upright young man to a fused mass of burned flesh that required an armoured support chair to allow me to function. It's not much, but I call it home.

I slide, frictionless, down the hallway to the room where Zael sleeps. Zael is one of the other two people in the house. Wystan Frauka is the other.

Wystan is sitting at Zael's bedside, his customary place. Wystan is my blunter, my untouchable, leadenly impervious to any and all psychic operation. He smokes lho-sticks incessantly, affects a disdainful manner, and amuses himself by reading lurid erotica.

He's quite wonderful. The disdain is an act. I can read that despite Wystan's unreadability. He has looked after Zael since the boy fell into his fugue state, his coma, his trance... whatever it is. He has carried him, washed him, read to him, watched him.

And he has promised me that he will kill Zael the moment he wakes up. If Zael is what we fear he is.

Zael Efferneti. Zael Sleet. A low-hab stack-runt from Petropolis, a vagabond kid, and also a nascent psyker, undetected by the periodic sweeps and examinations. Not just a psyker, a mirror psyker, that rarest of rare beasts.

And – and this is the big ‘and’ – potentially the most dangerous being in the sector. There exists a complex and involved series of predictions that concern the manifestation of a daemon in our reality, a daemon called Sleet or Slyte or some such variation. It was reckoned that Slyte would incarnate because of me, or because of one of the people close to me, on Eustis Majoris, between the years 400 and 403.M41. Hundreds, perhaps millions, were predicted to perish if Slyte got loose. So I was warned. I took precautions. Fate can be changed, predictions denied.

At Miserimus, during the attack that took Zeph Mathuin from us, Zael collapsed under psychic assault. At the time, the psykers bombarding him shrieked the name Slyte. Zael has been catatonic ever since. Perhaps his mind couldn't take it. Perhaps his fugue state is a result of him being too weak a vessel to host a daemon.

When he wakes, we will know. He will wake as Zael, or he will wake as a daemon clothed in flesh. If the latter is the case, then my untouchable is standing by to blunt the power of the waking daemon. There is also an autopistol in Wystan's coat pocket, so he can kill the host before it's too late.

Many of my fellow inquisitors, including my beloved ex-master, would chastise me for this. They would say I am being too lenient. They would say I am a fool, and I should take no chances whatsoever. I should extinguish Zael's life, right now, while he is helpless.

I choose not to. For one thing I cannot predict how such a course of action might provoke a sleeping daemon.

For the other, I cannot, in all conscience, murder a teenage boy in his sleep. Zael may not be possessed. Zael may not be Slyte. While there is still a chance, I will not be party to his execution.

Does that make me weak? Charitable? Foolish? Sentimental? Perhaps. Does it make me a radical? Yes, I think it does, though not in the way the term is usually used. I cannot, *will* not, sanction Zael's death on the basis of 'what if?'; I will give him the benefit of the doubt. Throne help me.

If I'm wrong, pray Terra I can contain the damage. If I'm right... it begs the question 'Where is the real Slyte?' Have we aborted his birth? Is his threat passed? It's 404, and that puts us outside the time span of the prophecy. Far enough outside? I don't know. Does Slyte lurk somewhere else, beyond my knowing? Like Molotch? I don't know that either.

I just have to go with what I have.

Wystan looks up as I enter the room. We do this every day. I give him a break from his steadfast vigil.

'All right?' he asks, nodding to my sleek metal chair.

'I'm all right. Were you reading to him?'

'A bedtime story.'

'About people at bedtime?'

He sniggers, and switches off his data-slate. 'The boy doesn't care what I read.'

'And if he does?'

'It's educational.'

'Go for a walk,' I tell him. 'Take a nap.'

Wystan nods and leaves the room. The scent of his last lho-stick lingers after him.

I bring my chair to a halt at the side of Zael's cot. His flesh is pale, his eyelids dark and sunken. He has been away a long time.

Zael, I begin. Zael, it's me, Ravenor. Just checking in. Are you well?

No response. Not even a flutter of muffled sentence. We've done this every day, so many times now.

If you can hear me, here's how things are. We won. On Eustis Majoris, we won. It was a hard fight, and the battle was costly, but we won. It was my old, old nemesis, Zygmunt Molotch, Zael. Dead twice at my hands, so I believed. He has a habit of coming back. He had taken the identity of the Lord Subsector, and was intent on using the arcane geography of Petropolis to reawaken an ancient language.

I imagine Zael chuckling, and looking confused. Even as I explain it, I realise it's such an odd story.

Enuncia, Zael. A primaeval language that grants the speaker the power of creation, the power to speak a word, and have that word make or destroy. He'd been years planning it. The city was the mechanism to bring it to life. And we stopped him. That's good. Thousands of people died, but that's preferable to billions. We couldn't have allowed him to walk free, empowered like a god.

I turn my chair slightly, kill the field, and drop onto the struts. The hooves of the struts sink into the carpet.

The bad part is, Molotch escaped. Hurt but alive, and in company with several dangerous individuals. Chief amongst them is a cult facilitator named Orfeo Culzean. Culzean is enormously pernicious. So is Molotch. Together...

Zael does not move. He does not react in any way. He sleeps like death is his sleep.

It's my duty to find them, to hunt down Molotch before he can regroup and try another scheme. That's the way he works, you see. Long term plans. He doesn't think twice about embarking on a scheme that might take

years, decades, to reach fruition. This I know about him. I've been sparring with him for more than seventy years. I dearly wish he'd stay dead.

There was a school, Zael, an academy: private, esoteric, long since closed down. It existed about a century ago. It was run by a renegade called Lilean Chase, now long dead. Its aim was to develop, by means psychic, eugenic and noetic, a generation of people who would work to further the cause of Chaos in this sector. Every one of them was a genius, a devil, a monster. They, and their handiwork, have plagued the Inquisition for decades. A secret society. A weapons-grade secret society. Molotch was one of the academy's graduates, one of Chase's star pupils. His intellect was astonishing, and it was tempered with extraordinary noetic training. Zygmunt Molotch, you see, is one of the Inquisition's most wanted. He is abominably malicious. He is Cognitae.

So, that's why I'm chasing him. It's not enough we thwarted him on Eustis Majoris. He's still alive, and we have to track him down and finish him before he can rise again. Nothing in my career is more important or vital than this. Not the Gomek Violation, or even the Cervan-Holman Affair on Sarum which, incidentally, I'm sure Molotch had a hand in. Tracking and executing Zygmunt Molotch is the single most important thing I can ever do with my curious life.

I regarded his so-innocently sleeping form.

Zael Sleet. Or is that Slyte?

The single most important thing, I hope. Anyway, we're close. I think we have him. He's here. By which I mean he's where we are. Tancred. One jump stop down from your homeworld, Eustis Majoris. The trouble is, the ordos want to reel me back in. I left Eustis Majoris in a mess. They want a report, and my explanation. They won't wait any longer. I risk losing my warrant and being denounced as a rogue element.

I don't like it, Zael, but I have to stop and answer to my masters. I just hope I can find and finish Molotch before they take away my rosette.

I pause.

Well, that's me. How are you? Zael?

He doesn't respond. I don't expect him to. I hear the door open behind me and presume it's Wystan.

It's not. It's Carl.

'The envoys have arrived,' he says.

+Have they? Very well. I'll be down directly.+

Zael sleeps on, unperturbed.

I engage my chair's lift field, turn, and follow Carl out of the room.

To face, as they say, the music.

PART ONE

A MATTER OF THE MOST
PLEASANT FRATERNAL
CONFIDENCE



ONE

IT TOOK A certain sort of man to perform eight ritual killings in three hours, and he was, without doubt, that sort of man.

Each killing was random, opportunistic, each one carried out with wildly different methods and weapons. The first, with a purloined knife, looked like a back street mugging. The second, a strangulation, was made to seem like a sex crime. The third and fourth, together, would later appear to be a drunken argument over cards that ended with both parties shooting one another simultaneously. The fifth, a poisoning, would have any medicæ examiner blaming poorly preserved shellfish. The sixth and seventh, also simultaneous, were electrocutions, and made faulty hab wiring seem responsible. The eighth, the most grisly, was staged to resemble a robbery gone wrong.

She finally caught up with him during the eighth murder. A local moneylender, and part-time fence, owned a house on the lower pavements behind the Basilica Mechanicus. He had slipped in through the back kitchen, found the moneylender alone in a shuttered study, and bludgeoned him to death with a votive statue of Saint Kiodrus.

Then he'd removed some paper money orders and gold bars from the moneylender's floor safe to cement the notion of a robbery.

'What are you doing?' she asked, cautiously entering the gloomy room behind him. The rank, metallic stink of blood choked the close air.

Bent over the body, he glanced at her. 'What needs to be done.'

He reached down and did something to the bloodstained corpse.

'You don't need that,' he added.

She kept the snub-nosed Hostec 5 aimed at the back of his head. 'I'll be the judge of what I need,' she replied.

‘Really, you don’t need that,’ he repeated, using the tone of command this time.

She lowered her aim, but she was strong and well trained. She didn’t put the gun away.

‘This is madness.’ she said. ‘You were told to stay in the exclave. Secrecy is paramount. To walk abroad invites discovery. And this... this killing...’

Her voice caught on the word. Leyla Slade was not a squeamish woman. She’d done her fair share of killing, but it had always been professional work. She’d never killed for pleasure, or to appease some mental deviation.

She was disappointed with him, he could tell. He didn’t really care, because Leyla Slade wasn’t very important in the grand sweep of things. But, for the moment, there were good reasons for keeping her on his side. She was one of his few friends in the cosmos. He could see the disgust on her face, as if she was being asked to babysit some sociopath. She didn’t understand. He decided it was time she did.

If nothing else, he didn’t like the idea that she considered him to be a homicidal pervert.

‘You think I’m killing for kicks?’ he asked.

Leyla shrugged. ‘It looks like what it looks like. I don’t care what kind of animal you are. I just get paid to mind you. In this case, that means dragging your psycho arse back to the exclave.’

He rose to his feet, facing her. The body on the floor lay in an undignified heap, one slipper off, one stockinged toe turned at right angles. The clothes had been ruffled and disarrayed by the fury of the attack. The votive statue of Saint Kiodrus had made a pink pulp of the moneylender’s face.

‘And if I don’t want to go back to the exclave?’ he asked.

‘Well, I’m not sure I can force you. I have no doubt of your abilities. At the very least, though, we’ll hurt each other. A lot.’

He nodded, and smiled. The smile was genuine. ‘Yes, I believe we would. I like you because you’re honest about these things. We would hurt each

other. Let's not.'

'Let's not. Agreed. Now, are you coming back?'

'Soon. Let's talk first, Leyla.'

She raised the gun. 'No. No negotiation. We're going back.'

He nodded, half turned, and made some kind of quick, flicking gesture with his right arm. She flinched, felt a slight impact against her wrist, and then the Hostec 5 was in his right hand.

He aimed it at her. He expected anger, dismay, perhaps even a futile attempt to retake possession of the weapon.

Instead she said, 'Teach me to do that.'

THEY CLEANED THE moneylender's house of incriminating traces, and left the victim on the floor of his study, beside the open floor safe. He stood patiently while she dabbed the specks of impact-spatter blood from his face and neck with a wet cloth. His clothes were black, and the rest wouldn't show.

'A robber would set a fire to cover the body, if a burglary had gone wrong,' she suggested. 'Oh...'

He had already overturned a lamp bowl, and small, blue flames were dancing along the edge of the rug.

FIVE STREETS FROM the moneylender's hab, they entered a small eating house, and took a table at the back. Leyla selected the place because of the low light levels and the fact they could sit away from the street. She ordered a pitcher of petal water, sweetmeats, a *cauldron* of lemon and tchail rice, and a carafe of the local red wine.

'This is nice,' he said.

'It's not. You still have my gun.'

He displayed his hands, open. They were very pale, very expressive.

She frowned, reached inside her jacket, and found her Hostec 5 secure in its rig.

'You can teach me how to do that, too.'

‘If you like. Are you eager to learn?’

‘Some things. I have skills, and they earn me a market price. My skills are good enough to please my master. And he teaches me some of his skills too.’

‘I’m sure he does.’

‘But a girl always wants to learn new things. From a man like you—’

‘Like me? My dear Leyla, not so many minutes past, you characterised me as a deviant killer. A psycho.’

She shrugged. ‘With skills.’ she said.

He laughed. She was a piece of work. When the time came, he might even spare her. Or at least, kill her mercifully.

The food arrived. The waitress gave them no more than a passing look. A couple, taking a late lunch. An off-worlder girl, tall, built like a swimmer, with short fair hair and a hard, unforgiving face and what? Her lover? Her employer? A slender man, dignified, dressed in black, with a hairless face that, though handsome, seemed uncomfortably asymmetrical.

Leyla picked at the rice. ‘You wanted to talk.’

He poured some wine. ‘Six months since we left Eustis Majoris.’ he said. ‘All that while, you’ve sheltered me. Kept me hidden, in your custody.’

‘For safety.’

‘I understand. I appreciate that. I also appreciate, if I haven’t told you, the efforts you and the others have made to secure my safety.’

‘It doesn’t look that way. The first opportunity you get, you slip away from us, and go off into a strange city, killing.’

‘There’s that,’ he nodded.

‘So?’ She had no desire to tell him the truth. No need to let him in on the fact that her master had told her to allow his escape, and to monitor it.

‘Our principal is getting stir crazy, Ley,’ Orfeo Culzean had said. ‘He’s kicking his heels, pacing the cage. Let him out for a while. Let him think he’s given us the slip. Give him his head for an hour or two, but tail him

and bring him back before he, oh, I don't know, tries to undermine the planetary government or something.'

Leyla Slade had laughed. 'I'll watch him,' she'd promised. 'If all he wants is a bit of fresh air...'

Molotch took a finger pinch of rice, added a sweetmeat, and slid the load into his mouth. He munched and then washed it down with a sip of petal water.

'I needed to get out,' he said. 'I have been handled for too long. By you, and, before that, by my Secretists at Petropolis. My life has been lived according to the timetables of others. I needed to walk, free.'

'If you'd asked, it could have been arranged.'

'If it had been arranged, then it wouldn't have been freedom, would it?'

'Point,' she conceded.

He sat back. 'On Eustis Majoris, Leyla, I came so close. I came so close to doing something extraordinary, something that would have changed the Imperium forever. Ended it, probably. But I was thwarted, and I failed, and you and your master were on hand to pull me out of the fire and bundle me away. Now, your master and I work on new schemes.'

'But?'

'Do you know who I serve, Leyla?'

'Yourself? The deep-time plans of the Cognitae?'

'Yes, and before all of those things?'

She shrugged.

'I won't speak their names aloud, or all the food in this emporium will spoil and all the wine turn to vinegar. They are Ruinous Powers.'

'I understand.'

'Good. So, you see, I had to give thanks. Though my mission to Eustis Majoris failed, I escaped with my life, to continue my work. I had to give thanks for that.'

'Orfeo would—'

‘Dear Orfeo doesn’t really understand. I don’t know what he tells you he is, Leyla, but he’s a mercenary. A prostitute. Brilliant, skilled, talented... but he works for money. I don’t do what I do for money, or even power, as power is understood by the grandees of this Imperium of Man. I am, I suppose, a man of quite strong religious beliefs.’

‘You needed to give thanks?’ she asked, drinking a sip of water.

‘To the old gods I serve. I had to make appeasement, benediction. I had to make a sacrifice of thanks for deliverance, even though that meant risking discovery. A sacrifice must honour the eight, for eight is the symbol, eight-pointed. A common follower might have killed eight at the eighth house on the eighth street in the eighth enclave, at eight in the evening, but I eschew such crudity. The agents of the Throne would have recognised the occult significance in a moment. Even they are not that stupid. So I made eight subtle sacrifices that, according to inspection, would seem random and unconnected.’

‘But they still had ritual purpose?’

He nodded. He ate some more, and drank some wine. She refilled his glass. ‘The beggar in the alley I made eight incisions with a knife that weighed eight ounces. I did this at eight minutes to the hour. The housemaid had eight moles on her left thigh, and took eight minutes to suffocate. I was very particular. The gamblers both held double eights in their hands, and eight shots were discharged. And so on. The moneylender, killed at eight minutes past the hour, was slain with eight primary blows, no more, no less, and had been busy accounting the books for the eighth trading month. I anointed all the bodies with certain marks and runes, all made in water now long evaporated. It was ritual, Leyla. It was worship. It was not the act of a psychopath.’

‘I see that now,’ she said.

He felt her remark was perhaps sardonic. He half-smiled anyway and drank some water.

‘Such an extraordinary level of detail.’ she added, scooping up more rice. ‘To plan it like that...’

‘I was taught to improvise. Leyla, I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t think like you think. My mind doesn’t work like yours does.’

‘Really?’

‘I was trained from birth to utilise the full dynamic of my mind. Trained in noetic techniques that give me an edge. More than an edge. What would take another man a week to plan, I can do in a moment.’

‘Really?’ she repeated.

He enjoyed the hauteur in her voice. The scorn. She was tolerating him.

‘Really. Leyla, I’m not boasting or showing off. This is what the Cognitae does to a mind. Acute observation, for a start. The ability to read low-level, passive body language. The ability to notice and compare. To analyse. To predict.’

‘Prove it.’

He lifted his glass and smiled. ‘Where would you like me to start?’ he asked.

‘Oh, you go right ahead.’

‘How many buttons did the waitress have on her bodice?’

Leyla hunched her shoulders. ‘Six.’

‘Six. Correct. Good. How many were undone?’

‘Two.’ she said.

‘Well noticed. The top two?’

‘No, the top one and the bottom one. Her hips were wide.’

‘Again, excellent. Are you sure you haven’t had Cognitae training, Leyla?’

She snorted. ‘All you’ve proved is we both like to look at pretty girls.’

‘Dressed in?’

‘What?’

‘Dressed in?’

‘A bodice?’

‘The silk from?’

‘Hesperus.’

‘Good, but no. Sameter. The weave is tighter, and there is a rumpled quality, a Touching, to Sameter silk. And the buttons were made on Gudrun.’

‘Really?’

‘They were gold, and had a hallmark. As she leaned over...’

Leyla put down her glass. ‘You’re making this up.’

‘Am I? The man at the booth next to us. We passed him on the way in. Rogue trader, armed. Where was his concealed weapon?’

‘Left armpit. I saw the bulge. Got a blade in his right boot too, under the hem of the trouser.’

‘You are sharp.’

‘It’s my business to know.’

‘Was his moustache longer on the left or right?’

‘I... why does that matter?’

‘Shorter on the right, because he smokes an obscura pipe, and the hairs don’t grow so fast on the side he sucks the mouthpiece. You could see it in his mannerisms, with the lho-stick. A habitual rise and draw. Which means?’

‘He’ll be unpredictable. And jumpy. Obscura does that.’

‘Now you’re learning.’

‘It means nothing,’ she laughed.

‘The man by the window. Left- or right-handed?’

‘Right. He’s drumming the fingers of his right hand on the table top beside his cup of caffeine.’

‘Wrong. He’s watching the street crowd, because he’s waiting for a business partner he doesn’t know. His left hand is under the table, on the butt of his weapon. A Hecuter model, badly stowed. The right hand is a distraction.’

Leyla shook her head. ‘Should I go over and ask him to prove it?’

‘If you want to get shot. The barman. 19th Gudrunite Irregulars. A Guard veteran.’

‘Why?’

‘Tattoo on his left wrist. “Company of Angels”. The vets of the 19th took that as a tat after Latislaw Heights.’

‘You can see that?’

‘Not from here. But on the way in. And you—’

‘Me?’

‘You’ve eaten enough, you’re full. But you like the rice, so you keep picking at it, even though you don’t want it.’

‘It’s good rice.’

‘And you haven’t touched your wine in thirteen minutes. You keep playing with the glass, but you don’t drink, because you’re afraid that if you get merry, you’ll lose control of this situation. But you play with the glass all the same, so as not to draw attention to the fact you’re not drinking.’

‘That’s just nonsense.’

‘Is it?’ He looked at her. ‘You sit slightly sidelong to me, favouring your left buttock, because your right hip gives you pain. Old wound? An augmetic?’

She breathed out. ‘An augmetic.’

Molotch clapped his hands. ‘You dearly want to go back now, but you’re afraid of goading me, or having to force me. You want to make it seem like my idea.’

‘Now, look—’

‘You’re quite certain I don’t know that Orfeo instructed you to let me loose for a few hours. Orfeo thinks I’m going stir crazy. The idea was to let me walk around and blow off steam.’

‘Dammit, Molotch—’

‘Don’t damn it at all. Enjoy it. What could I do, do you suppose? What could I do, just sitting here?’

‘I don’t know.’

Molotch removed a tiny phial from his sleeve and put it on the table top beside the *cauldron* of rice. ‘Osicol Plague, in suspension. I took it from Orfeo’s personal kit. If I release it here, I could decimate the entire city quarter.’

‘For the love of— No!’

‘I won’t. There’d be no sense in that. But consider the options. The banker at the table to our left. He works at the city mint. He has a brooch on his waistcoat, before you ask. The sigil of the banking guild, and the office of coinage circulation. If I dropped the phial into his business case, he would find it and open it when he returned to his office. The mint would be contaminated, and would have to be sealed off for fifteen years. The local currency would crash, and bring the subsector economy down. Decades of damage. Or take that young man over there, the one in the private booth. He’s the second son of a minor baron, slumming it, but I know he’s in with the court crowd.’

Molotch produced a small medical injector from his pocket and put it down on the table beside the phial. It was full of clear fluid. ‘Suspension liquid. Inert and viscous, metabolised in six hours. I could go into the washrooms, load the plague solution into it, and bump into that second son as I came back. In a day or two, the entire royal house of this planet would be dead from contact plague. An ideal moment to stage a coup.’

‘But that’s just... just...’ she whispered.

‘Now you’re getting the idea,’ he said. ‘What about this? That drunk by the bar. I’ve been gently hypnotising him with finger movements since we came in. Allow me to prove it.’

Molotch moved his fingers. The drunken man lurched and tottered over to them.

‘What’s your name?’ Molotch asked.

‘Sire Garnis Govior, sir,’ the man wobbled.

‘And your job?’

‘I am chief under translator to the House of the Governor, sir.’

Leyla stared at Molotch.

‘And you thought I’d let you pick this bar.’ he smiled. ‘It’s a famous haunt of the Administratum classes. I noticed Garnis here because of his signet ring.’

‘This ring?’ the man asked, displaying it so abruptly he swayed.

‘The very same. You have face time with the governor, then?’

‘I do, sir, I surely do.’ the man said, wobbling.

‘So, if I asked you to strangle him the next time you saw him, setting off a local sector war that would bring in Houses Gevaunt, Nightbray and Clovis, you’d have no problem?’

‘None at all,’ the man assured Molotch. ‘Not a problem at all.’

‘You’d strangle the Lord Governor?’ Leyla asked.

‘Like a bloody shot. Like he was a bloody whelp. Yes, mam.’

‘But I won’t,’ said Molotch. ‘You can go now, Garnis.’

‘Thank you kindly,’ the man said, and staggered off.

Molotch looked at the wide-eyed Leyla. ‘Every opening. Every chance. Every chink. That’s what the Cognitae are trained to do. To look, to see, to find, to use. In the course of this delightful lunch, Leyla, I could have brought the subsector down three or four times over. Just like that.’

He flicked something away with his thumb. It landed on the floor of the bar and broke, oozing fluid.

‘Oh holy-!’ Leyla began.

‘Relax. It’s just the suspension fluid. The plague’s in my pocket. So, let’s consider the Inquisition.’

‘The Inquisition?’

‘Most particularly, the office of the ordos on this world.’

‘You can’t see that from here.’

‘Oh, I can. In the over-bar mirror. See?’

‘Terra, I hadn’t noticed that.’

He sipped his wine. ‘I can see the fortress of the Inquisition from my seat. Such a big fortress. Towering over the city. It was built by the Black

Templars, you know? Long since vacated, but one day they might be back. Until then, the Inquisition uses the keep. It's going to be a bloody fight the day the Templars return. Anyway, they're flying flags. Several dark flags. What does that mean?'

'Does it mean anything? They're flying flags.'

'The Inquisition doesn't suppose anyone understands their protocols and heraldry. Black flags above their fortress. Just for show. Just for threat. But I have made it my business to understand and monitor the way they signal to one another.'

'So? I can barely see the mirror from where I'm sitting.'

'I'll tell you what it means. The flags are the black crests of Siquo, Bilocke and Quist, symbols the Inquisition identify with respect and honour. They are flying ceremonially. There are envoys in residence. Several high-ranking envoys. Actually, you can tell that simply by the number of weapon ports they've uncovered. Someone important is here.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning, Ravenor's here, as we feared, and they've decided to rein him in. Which is good news for us.'

There was a sudden, brutal crash. Voices around the eating house rose in alarm. Garnis had slipped over in the pool of suspension fluid and brained himself on the edge of the bar rail.

He was dead.

'Let's go,' said Molotch.

They rose and picked their way out of the eating house, moving around the crowd that had gathered around Garnis's misfortune.

'That's nine,' Leyla whispered. 'I thought you only wanted eight?'

'I did, but I'm not stupid. This one isn't ritual. This is a ninth to ruin the pattern. The ordos are sharp and clever. They would have seen a pattern of eight except for this.'

He bent down in the edge of the crowd and picked up a small piece of the broken glass phial Garnis had slipped on.

‘A present,’ he said. ‘A deodand for your master.’

‘I’m sure he’ll love it,’ said Leyla Slade. ‘Wait.’ she added.

He paused. She licked her right index finger, reached out, and wiped away one last lone speck of blood from his face that she’d missed earlier.

‘Thank you.’ he said.

They stepped out into the bright day and the bustling crowd swallowed them up.



TWO

AT HER MASTER'S mind-whispered instruction, Patience Kys opened the courtyard gates to let them in.

She didn't move from her seat on the stone bench. One nod of her head, one blink of her green eyes, and invisible hawsers of telekinetic power drew the heavy timber doors open. The lower edges of the doors scraped slightly on the ground, and lifted a small cloud of dust from the dry cobbles. The doors made a juddering, rumbling sound as they swung in. Fierce patches of yellow sunlight invaded the quiet shade of the courtyard through the opening gates.

Nayl, Thonius and Plyton came out of the house to watch the arrival.

Nayl's expression was unreadable. The skin of his shaved scalp had caught a touch of sun. He wore a tight grey bodyglove reinforced with articulated ceramite plates around the shoulders, neck and torso. He stood at the top of the house steps, in the shadow of the entrance archway, adjusting his gloves. He made no attempt to conceal the Hecuter Arms Midgard bolstered on his left hip.

Maud Plyton emerged to stand next to him. She had taken to wearing Navy surplus fatigues since quitting the Magistratum. Today, she had chosen a one piece, zip-front flight suit of shabby khaki, heavy-laced combat boots, and a white undervest. The unflattering fit of the unisex clothing accentuated her large, slightly thickset frame, a build that contrasted sharply with the very delicate pinch of her features. She wore her dark hair cropped short, a Magistratum regulation she had found it hard to abandon.

Carl Thonius, slender and trim, wore the bottom half of a black bodyglove and the high, patent leather boots of a ceremonial cavalry officer,

complete with rowel spurs that clinked when he walked. On his upper half he wore a purple tail coat with gold trim. Open, the coat framed a rectangle of scrawny white chest and washboard stomach above the glove's waistband. His long fingers were covered in rings, and his hair was dyed black and roughly chopped into a mane. He was a long way from the fey, fussy, impeccably dressed dandy who had first joined the inquisitor's company a decade before.

'Do we know who it is?' Nayl asked him.

Carl shook his head. 'Not a clue.'

Across the yard, Kara and Belknap emerged from another doorway. Kara was short, voluptuous, her bright red hair stridently clashing with her lime green vest and white pantaloons. Belknap, dressed in simple black combat trousers, was a slim man of average build, his hair short and unremarkably brown, his face unexceptionally ordinary except for a sleepy glitter of intense wisdom and reassurance in his eyes. Those eyes had seen a lot, as a battlefield medicae. They would see a whole lot more as the private physician to an inquisitor's warband.

Patience Kys, tall and feline, rose from the bench at last and joined Kara and Belknap. In her dark brown bodyglove, she seemed all legs. Her black hair was hanging loose, but as she walked, she reached up with her hands, gathered it, and twisted it into a neat tail that she secured with a silver pin.

'Brace yourselves.' she said. 'I smell trouble.'

The envoys entered the courtyard. First, an outrider on a long, low, powerful warbike, its engine issuing an indignant splutter that resonated around the courtyard walls. Then, one after another, three Chimera carriers, like monolithic stone blocks, their track sections clattering and squealing. The carriers were finished in a matt grey, as if they were supposed to be incognito. As if a trio of thirty-eight tonne armoured vehicles could be incognito. Their turbines grumbling, they drew up on the lower part of the courtyard, side-by-side. Six psyberskulls droned in with them, and took up hovering stations, like dragonflies.

A second outrider, low on his machine like the first, brought up the rear. This second bike raced around the parked carriers, and halted, revving. The rider put one foot down and sat up.

In a line: bike, carrier, carrier, carrier, bike.

+Close the gates.+

Kys nodded, and obliged. The gates rumbled shut.

The carriers shut down their engines. Exhaust fumes drifted away, up and out of the yard.

‘Leave this to me,’ said Nayl.

‘Why?’ asked Carl.

‘Look at my face. Am I about to take any shit?’

Carl smiled and nodded. ‘No. And I like that about you.’

Nayl looked at Maud. ‘Got a piece?’

‘I thought they were friends?’

‘No such thing, girl. Go get a piece and stay inside behind the door.’

Maud looked back at Nayl, waiting for the punchline. Then she realised he was serious and disappeared back into the house.

Harlon Nayl left Thonius on the steps and stomped down into the sunlight. He walked towards the line of vehicles. The hovering psyberskulls whirred and buzzed, bobbing slightly, as he came into range.

The two outriders had killed the engines of their warbikes and rocked them over onto their stands. Both dismounted. They were clad in matching scale-armoured bodygloves, smeared in dust, which made them look like extensions of their matt-black and bare-metal bikes. They removed their helmets, yanking free the skeins of wires and plugs that linked them to the weapon-systems of the bikes.

The rider on the left was a young male, tall and slightly built, with long white hair that shook free and loose the moment his helmet was off. He looked at Nayl. He had the most distressingly blue eyes.

‘We greet the master of the house, and humbly thank him for this audience.’ he said. His voice was soft and clear, like rainwater.

‘The greeting is returned.’ said Nayl. He flicked his eyes up at the hovering psyberskulls. ‘A little too many guns around for this to be cordial.’

The young man smiled broadly. ‘I apologise.’ he said. He took a control wand from his hip pocket and waved it. With a low murmur, the skulls deactivated and sank to the courtyard floor. ‘That was rude. Just a precaution, you realise.’

He pocketed the wand, hung his helmet on the antlers of his bike and walked towards Nayl.

‘Interrogator Gall Ballack.’ he said, extending a hand the moment he’d peeled the glove off.

‘Nayl.’ said Nayl, shaking the hand.

‘I know.’ said Ballack. ‘I have studied the records. I’m an admirer of your work. Where’s Ravenor?’

‘By that, I suppose you mean Inquisitor Ravenor?’ Nayl replied.

Ballack pursed his lips and nodded. ‘Presumptuous of me, and lacking respect. Of course, I meant Inquisitor Ravenor.’

‘He’s inside.’

‘My senior has come to speak with him.’

‘Perhaps your senior would like to get out of his tank and come in, then.’ said Nayl.

Ballack snorted a laugh. ‘You know, Harlon, I think she might just do that.’

There was a series of pneumatic clanks, and the boarding hatches of the Chimeras began to open. Over in the shadows, Kys jerked her head at Kara, and the pair of them slipped away into the house. Belknap, slightly at a loss, stayed put.

The second outrider had taken off his helmet. He was a she. A very tall she with long braided, beaded hair.

‘Shit.’ whispered Harlon Nayl.

+Great Throne of Terra.+

‘You’re seeing this?’ Nayl murmured.

+Of course.+

‘She’s the dead spit.’ Nayl said.

+It’s uncanny.+

‘This will be weird for you, then, I guess.’

+I can do weird, Harlon. I’m a professional.+

‘Even so.’

+Bring them in. Let’s get this done.+

PEOPLE DISMOUNTED FROM the carriers: two dozen troopers with mixed weapons, all of them wearing the rosette of the ordos: an old man with a cane; a tiny, child-framed woman in selpic blue leading a pair of servitor gunhounds; an ogryn slaved to a massive plasma cannon; a woman and a man in long leather coats; a quartet of rubricators with their writing machines; a man in shiny jet body armour; and another woman, ash-blond, slender, dressed in a long gown of ochre Hydraphur silk. She was impressive. The sight of her made Nayl suck in his breath.

Then the chief envoy. Her body was armoured in red plate and she walked with a limp. Every centimetre of her armour was engraved and covered with seals. The parchment scrolls hung off her like feathers, as if she was fledged like a bird.

+Well, I should be flattered, I suppose.+

‘Yeah,’ whispered Nayl. ‘Why?’

+That’s Inquisitor Myzard. Senior secretary to the Ordos Helican, and Lord Rorken’s immediate subordinate.+

‘Throne, they’re not playing around then, are they?’

Myzard limped across the yard to Nayl. She looked up into his face. She had once, Nayl could tell, been a beautiful woman: strong, articulate, animated. Her face was lined now, contoured by extreme age. Her hair was straw gold.

‘Are you the interrogator?’ she asked in a brittle, tired voice. ‘Are you Thonius?’

‘This is Nayl, ma’am,’ Ballack said gently. ‘The, ah—’

‘Thug,’ Nayl suggested with a rogue’s smile, extending his hand.

Myzard grinned and shook his hand. ‘I like you already,’ she warned. ‘Where’s that bastard Ravenor? I need to have words.’

‘As I just said, he’s inside. And I’m sure he’s got some of his own.’

Myzard laughed again. ‘I do like you. Spunky. Let’s go and talk to Gideon, shall we?’

‘Allow me to lead you in, ma’am,’ Thonius said, hurrying down the steps with a hand extended. ‘I’m Interrogator Thonius. My master is awaiting your pleasure.’

Myzard sniffed. ‘I’ve been awaiting my pleasure for sixty-eight years.’ She glanced at Nayl. ‘Possibly I’ve found it now, though.’

Nayl looked at Carl and mouthed, ‘Help me’. Carl smiled. ‘This way, ma’am.’

They filed in past Nayl, up into the house. The gunhounds barked at him as they were led by. The woman in ochre, the ash-blonde, turned Nayl’s head as she passed. She didn’t look at him.

They had gone in towards the house and only the female outrider remained, standing by the parked vehicles.

Nayl walked over to her.

‘We had better go in,’ he said.

She nodded. She was taller than he was.

‘I have to ask,’ he said. ‘Esw Sweydyr?’

‘You know the Carthaen clans?’

‘I knew one of their number once. A long time ago. Arianhrod.’

‘My mother’s sister. I am Angharad.’

He made the sign of the aquila. ‘Harlon Nayl. You should know, my master was deeply in love with your aunt, a long time ago.’

‘I know this too. I know she died by his side. She was the reason I joined the Inquisition’s service.’ Angharad returned his respectful aquila with the fist-punch to sternum salute of Carthe.

He waited while she untied her long, sheathed sabre from the war-bike’s frame.

‘Let’s go in,’ he said.

‘Let’s.’

‘If you don’t mind me asking... what’s its name?’

She cinched the sword harness tighter around her shoulder.

‘Evisorex.’ she replied.



THREE

I SIT WAITING for them, in a pool of sunlight in the drawing room. I have banished my party to the far corners of the house, just in case. The only ones I allow to be present are Carl Thonius, leading the visitors in, and Harlon Nayl, bringing up the rear.

Nayl is walking with the woman Angharad. I find I am insanely jealous. Arianhrod was the only woman I ever loved, in my physical life. She died just a few short months before I was maimed and reduced to this state, and somehow, tragically, that had made it better. If Arianhrod had still been there, I would have...

Killed myself. Killed myself, without a doubt.

But she had died first. I had coped with all of my loss.

And now... her doppelganger appears. A Carthaen swordswoman so physically reminiscent of my long lost love it is painful.

I turn my chair to face Myzard,

‘Gideon,’ she announces. ‘Good to see you.’

+And you, Ermina. Do you have any objections to thought conference? I can kick in my voxsponder.+

‘Mind’s fine,’ she says, and sits down on a tub chair that groans.

‘Meet the others,’ she says. ‘D’mal Singh.’

The tiny woman with the gun hounds nods. The hounds snuffle and whine.

‘Tarkos Mentator.’

The old savant, bent on his cane, also nods.

‘Shugurth.’

The ogryn bows.

‘Interrogator Claudel and Interrogator Gonzale. Interrogator Ballack.’

The man and the woman in the long coats snap to attention. Ballack inclines his head with a smile, his face framed by his long white hair.

‘Angharad Esw Sweydyr.’

The towering swordswoman beside Nayl makes no movement whatsoever.

‘Inquisitor Fenx.’

The man in the black body armour makes the sign of the aquila.

‘And this is Inquisitor Lilith.’

The woman in the ochre gown with the ash-blond hair offers me a respectful nod.

+Lilith. I’ve read your work and admired it. You have, I understand, a particular interest in the eldar xenotype.+

‘I have, sir. And I have read your work too, and adored it,’ she answered.

+Thank you.+

‘Well, now every one loves every one else,’ says Myzard, ‘let’s get to business. Gideon, you have to stop. You are this close to being branded a rogue.’ She holds up her left hand and pinches the forefinger towards the thumb to indicate the distance.

I open the slot on the fore casing of my chair and display my blue rosette.+I am operating under Special Condition, and my Lord Rorken knows this.+

Myzard folds her hands. ‘Such an understanding goes only so far. It’s time to stop.’

‘Molotch is still out there,’ Thonius says.

+My own interrogator, Carl Thonius,+ I send.

‘We’ve met,’ says Myzard. ‘Yes, Molotch is out there. But he’s a loose end that others can deal with. You are requested to stop.’

+Requested?+

Myzard sniffs. ‘Ordered. Requested is so much more mealy-mouthed. We’ve been requesting you for months and you’ve been avoiding us. Now

it's an order.'

+From my lord?+

The senior envoy nods her head. Fenx steps forward and draws a sealed data-slate from his belt pouch. He holds it awkwardly for a moment and stares at my chair.

'Is there somewhere... somewhere I can insert this?'

'I've an idea,' mutters Nayl from the back of the room.

Myzard sniggers. 'Play nice, Gideon. Dataport?'

I open a dataport on the side of my chair unit and Fenx loads the slate. I open it, spin it out, and extend the hololith display around me in my dark cocoon of virtual light. The missive has been recorded by my Lord Rorken personally. It is as if I was standing next to him. He looks tired, frustrated. He says my name. I kill the rest of the sequence. I don't need to see any more. Rorken is the only man I answer to, and he has spoken.

+All right. I'll come back in. There, it wasn't so painful, was it, Ermina?+

'Thankfully no, Gideon. Look, you have to understand you're not about to be censured. Rorken is pleased with your work. So am I, dammit. On Eustis, you did an extraordinary thing. You stopped something that could have destroyed everything. All of us.'

+Oh, so you have read my report?+

'Cover to cover,' says Lilith. 'But it is the very magnitude of the event that forces your recall, sir. Enuncia alone, and the collective knowledge of it gathered by your team, must be examined in forensic detail. A – forgive me – curt report is not enough.'

'And there is the matter of Eustis Majoris itself,' says the savant Mentator. His voice is as involved and thready as old, fused wiring. 'What matter might that be?' Thonius asks. 'The damage,' says Mentator. The destruction. The deaths.'

+Am I to be held responsible?+

'Oh, for goodness sake, Gideon,' Myzard says, getting to her feet and looking around the room. 'It's going to take years to rebuild the subsector

capital. This whole region is in crisis, you understand? Crisis?’

+I know what crisis means.+

‘Eighteen planetary governments about to fall. There are currency issues. Faith issues.’ Interrogator Ballack was speaking fast, quietly. ‘A loss of belief in Imperial rule. General unrest. Strikes and civil disobedience on nine major planets. A mutiny at the Navy yards on Lenk. The list is extensive. I won’t bother you with every detail, but you need to understand... if Molotch had succeeded, he would have busted this sub-sector, this sector even, apart at the seams. You stopped him. But the price of you stopping him was still extensive. Scarus sector is damaged and fragile. Repairing the infrastructure will take generations. We need your help.’+My help?+

‘It is essential that you and every member of your team is extensively debriefed,’ says Interrogator Gonzale. ‘That process might take months. We can learn from you, inquisitor. And what we learn from you may save us years in the rebuilding process.’

‘Put simply,’ says Myzard, ‘you can’t just make a big old mess and leave others to clean it up.’

I know this. I have been avoiding it. It is a necessary part of any inquisitor’s work. After the Gomek Violation, I spent three years in restorative, cooperative study with the planetary government. After the Nassar case, my old master Gregor Eisenhower devoted the better part of a decade on Messina, tidying up behind himself. After the Necron Wars, Inquisitor Bilocke, blessed be his memory, set aside the remainder of his life to repairing the governments and substrate of the Tarquin Stars. Myzard is still looking around.

+Carl, perhaps you could rustle up some wine and some food for our guests?+

Carl nods. ‘No problem, sir.’

‘That’s very kind of you, Gideon,’ Myzard says, sitting down again.

‘What about Molotch?’ Nayl asks. Everyone looks around at him.

‘Did I say that out loud?’ he adds. ‘Good. What about Molotch?’

‘What about him?’ asks Fenx.

‘He’s loose. He’s free. He’s out there.’

‘Out where?’ asks Inquisitor Lilith.

Nayl shrugs a shoulder. ‘Out there. In Basteen.’

‘We’ve no reason to suppose he’s here.’ says Fenx.

‘Haven’t you?’ Nayl asks. ‘We have.’

‘Evidence it,’ demands Claudel.

Nayl pauses. I feel for him. He is so loyal. ‘I can’t just do that. It’s—’

+It’s a hunch.+

Myzard stares at my chair. ‘A hunch?’

+Don’t look at me like that, Ermina. A hunch. Yes, a hunch. I do that, and look what I do.+

‘So noted. I trust you. But a hunch?’

+He’s here.+

‘A hunch is not enough.’

+I have... faith.+

Myzard and Fenx exchange looks.

+Molotch must be brought in. He’s been at large for too many years. He’s rabidly dangerous. That’s why I’ve stayed out so long, ignoring your calls. I have to bring him in.+

‘You’re too close, Gideon.’

+That’s why I’m the one to do it.+

‘No, you’re too close, Gideon.’ Myzard repeats. Carl comes back in with a tray of drinks, and Myzard takes one. ‘Molotch is your nemesis. You’re twinned in destiny. Such a long, involved duel you’ve fought, down the years. You’re too close. It’s becoming a disadvantage.’

+I don’t believe so.+

She sips her drink. ‘That’s your prerogative. But I’m telling you this, Gideon, in all frankness... the reason you’ve never brought Molotch down is that you’re too close and therefore not the man to do it.’

+Rubbish.+

‘How many times have you killed him now?’ Lilith asks. ‘Two? Three?’

+He’s tenacious.+

‘He’s nigh-on bloody invulnerable to you,’ Myzard smiles. ‘Molotch isn’t here, Gideon. He’s fled. You’re obsessed, and tired, and too long on the chase. You’re needed elsewhere. Let other, fresher minds hunt Molotch down.’

+You might be right,+ I concede.

‘I am right. Good wine, by the way.’ Myzard puts her glass down.

+I’ll take your word for it.+

‘We are very able, inquisitor.’ says Fenx.

+I’m sure you are, sir.+

‘We will find Molotch and bring him to justice.’ says Lilith.

+Am I allowed to ask how?+

Myzard nods. ‘We have agents active all across the subsector. Some are uncovering strong leads. Fenx and his team leave Tancred tonight for Sancour. In two days, Lilith and her party head out for Ingeran. Six hours later, my interrogator here, Ballack, commands a party to the Halo Stars.’

+You say you have leads?+

‘Currency accounts on Sancour have been traced to Molotch,’ says Fenx. ‘They’ve been accessed in the last month. That’s a strong lead.’

‘I have sourced Cognitae holdings on Ingeran to Molotch,’ says Lilith. ‘Orfeo Culzean has territory there. Someone is trying to dissolve those assets. That’s also a strong lead.’

‘Orfeo Culzean’s collection of deodands was shipped out, via an unnamed cash wafer, to Encage, three weeks ago,’ says Ballack. ‘The collection had been held by the hotel at Petropolis. They were routed as cargo on a bulk trader.’

+I know. Don’t waste your time. It’s a double blind.+

Ballack shrugs. ‘We’ll see.’

‘It’s over, Gideon. You can stop now, and rest,’ Myzard says.

+All right,+ I sent.+He's your problem now. Just don't come crying to me when—+

'Might I have some more wine?' Myzard asks, holding up her glass.

'YOU'RE JUST GOING to roll over on this?' Kara asks after Myzard has gone.

+I think so. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life hunting Molotch?+

She stands beside me in the courtyard of the house. Evening has stretched the shadows out into long, grey lines.

'No,' she answers. She looks at me. 'Because I don't believe it will take the rest of our lives.'

+Because we're close?+

'Because we're close. You believe so, so does Patience. You feel it.'

+It's still just a hunch. I have no solid proof. I felt quite embarrassed trying to explain it to Myzard and her people. Trying to justify...+

'What?'

+Gregor trained me to follow my instinct. But he also warned me against obsession.+

'He should talk,' she smiles.

+I've been sparring with Zygmunt Molotch for a lifetime, Kara. Myzard's right. It's become too personal. I can't see past it. So I have to let it go. The repair of Eustis Majoris is an obligation I cannot ignore. Every word they spoke was correct. In fact, I think they were quite diplomatic about it, all things considered. I have a duty to the rank I hold. I bested Molotch soundly and should content myself with that. For Throne's sake, let others waste their days hunting the mad bastard to his doom.+

Kara shakes her head and sits down on one of the stone benches. Over the years I have come to appreciate how gorgeous she is. Not beautiful like Kys, but warm and curved and appealing. I have known her physicality from inside, waring her on so many occasions. She is the closest thing to a lover I can claim any more, although only in the most tenuous, perverse

sense. And now she has another in her life. A man who can provide her the simple, human consolations I will never manage. I know she feels this too. She has been far more unwilling to let me wear her lately. I chide myself that I am a fool for feeling cuckolded.

I am surprised and, I hate to admit it, delighted by her persistence.

‘What about closure?’ she asks.

+It’s overrated.+

Kara snorts. ‘Since when? Gregor always chased proper closure.’

+And look where he ended up. That’s not for me. I have strayed as radically as I am comfortable with. I will not plunge on and become a rogue.+

I can taste the disappointment in her suddenly, even though I am not touching her mind. She cannot hide it. ‘What about the rest of us, Gideon?’ she asks.

+What about you?+

‘Did you not consider that we might need closure too? For Majeskus? For Norah and Will and Eleena? For Zeph?’

+That’s low.+

‘But it’s true.’

+Service is its own reward.+

‘Not actually,’ she says, getting to her feet. ‘For you, maybe.’

+I thought you’d be pleased.+

‘Pleased?’

+We’ll be here another week while I get my affairs in order. Then we’ll return to Eustis Majoris. Once there, it will be a long and forensic process of evaluation and report. The team will be non-active. It would be a good time for self-review and reorganisation. For changes. I thought you would be pleased at the opportunity.+

‘Again, “pleased”?’

+I have sensed there is something on your mind, Kara. I think I know what it is.+

‘There’s nothing on my mind.’

+There is—+

‘There’s nothing! Get into my head if you want to! Take a look! But stop inferring from my surface moods! There’s nothing!’

+Very well.+

‘I mean it.’

+I can tell.+

She stares at me. She seems angry. Or is it guilty?

+I won’t probe. I trust you.+

For a fleeting moment, Kara looks let down. She begins to walk away.

‘We need closure,’ she says.

+We got it. On Eustis Majoris, we got it. The rest is just housework.+

‘But you had a hunch,’ she says. ‘Your instinct told you he was here.’

+Kara, I hate to diminish myself in your eyes, but it’s quite possible I have been fooling myself. History makes me want to finish the business with Molotch and, moreover, I have little appetite for the arduous chores awaiting me on Eustis. This chase has become displacement activity, putting off the inevitable. Yes, I had a hunch. Just a hunch, and sometimes they don’t pay out.+

‘Yours always do,’ she says. Throne, how those words will come to haunt me.

+Not this time. Molotch isn’t here. My hunch is empty air. It’s time we stopped this and got on with something useful.+



FOUR

NAKED, ORFEO CULZEAN lay face down on a suspensor couch, and allowed the inker to finish composing the final deed across the small of his back. Culzean found the tiny prickle and pinch of the inker's needles quite stimulating. The quiet gave him time to think, space to think. The tiny pain kept his thoughts sharp. His mind was a huge, purring engine, always active, and it benefited from reflection. Time to think, to consider, to pace around a problem and survey it, end to end.

'In my experience,' he said out loud, 'the Imperium is full of holes, and the trick is to identify those holes and exploit them.'

Working tightly with his steel needles, dabbing them occasionally into the ink pots spread out on the floor beside his knees, the inker grunted acknowledgement. He did not understand Culzean's words, because Culzean was speaking *idrish*, a Halo Star dialect he'd picked up in his formative years. The inker assumed his client was murmuring some pain-relieving mantra. People often found the needle work excruciating.

'I mean, billions and billions of lives, all herded and ordered by a vast bureaucracy. You find the spaces in that, you see. The gaps. You don't disrupt the system, for that makes you visible. You inhabit the voids within its structure and disappear.' The inker grunted again.

Culzean shook his head. Fools, idiots. They were all fools and idiots. Except Molotch and Ravenor. And for the benefit of the former and the beguiling of the latter, he was engaged in this present business. It was a task few men could have risen to. But he was singular. And there would be rewards. My, what rewards there would be.

The exclave's perimeter alarm buzzed quietly. Lucius Worna got up to see to it. The huge, scar-faced bounty hunter, brought into Culzean's employ

by fate and circumstances, had been sitting silently in a dark corner of the room like a stone idol. Culzean thought Worna an impressive specimen, though he preferred to work with more subtle, delicate tools. But there were times when the crude muscle and firepower of a beast like Worna were indispensable.

After a minute or so, Worna reappeared through the door at the end of the long room, followed by Leyla Slade and Molotch himself. The candles flickered in the draft. 'Leyla! Zygmunt!' Culzean called, looking up. 'Busy?' she asked, grinning. 'Naked busy?'

'You are a tease, Leyla Slade.' Culzean chuckled. 'The nice man with the needles is almost done.'

The exchange had been made in Low Gothic, and the inker understood it. 'I am almost completed.' he said.

Leyla nodded. 'Making us legal?' she asked her master in *idrish*. Molotch looked on.

'Just so.' Culzean replied in the same dialect. 'The deeds to the exclave, transferred to my skin. All legal and above board. This work makes us invisible to the system.'

Tancred's properly laws were obtuse and ancient. Ownership of land, dwellings, estates and slaves were considered binding only when they were tattooed onto flesh. A man had to have the deeds of his legacy pricked into his skin before the legislature would regard him with any genuine authority. The Guild of Inkers was an ancient and trusted office, and plied their trade in the merchant quarters. When deeds were transferred, existing tattoos were blacked out. To be blacked was to be disowned or disinherited. Certain ruthless and prosperous landowners entered the legislature wearing the dry, rustling skins of those they had inherited from, like capes.

The exclave was a little system of towers and habitats situated on the north end of the central city arm. Culzean had owned it for twenty years, since a certain deal he'd made, but he'd had the deeds held on the skin of a seneschal, a man in his pay. Now he had returned to claim the site, he'd

paid the seneschal off, had the deeds blacked, and was having them rewritten on his own flesh. The seneschal had been remunerated well for his service. And then killed and disposed of by Lucius Worna. Culzean was not a man to take chances.

‘We’re almost done,’ Culzean said in *idrish*.

‘Well, hurry up. I have things I want to talk about.’ Molotch replied. He had wandered around the couch and was examining the inker’s needles. He had also spoken in *idrish*.

Culzean looked at him. ‘My friend, I had no idea you were fluent.’

‘I’m not. But it’s easy enough to pick up.’

‘From a few sentences?’

‘Orfeo, I believe you still underestimate me.’

‘He’s a wonder.’ Leyla said brightly. ‘And he has a trick with a gun too that—’

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘It’s done.’ said the inker in Low Gothic, rising.

‘Thank you,’ said Culzean, gathering up his robes as he stood.

‘There is the matter of payment, sir.’ the inker mentioned, delicately.

‘I’ll cover it.’ said Molotch in *idrish*. He weighed the needle he was holding and then, very simply, flicked it. It impaled the inker through the right tear duct, sticking out like an unnaturally long eyelash. The inker wavered. An ink-stained tear track ran down his right cheek. Then he fell, dropping onto his knees initially, then folding at the waist so his upper body crashed face first onto the tiled floor. Leyla Slade winced. The face-on impact had driven the needle in up to the stub.

‘Coins would have sufficed,’ Culzean said mildly. Lucius Worna chuckled a deep, dirty laugh.

‘I would like to have a proper conversation with you, Orfeo.’ Molotch said, taking a seat.

‘That sounds ominous,’ Orfeo replied. ‘Drink?’

‘Secum.’ said Molotch. Orfeo nodded to Leyla. ‘For all of us,’ he said.

‘What about-?’ Leyla asked, glancing at the inker’s corpse, kneeling as if in prayer.

‘I don’t think he needs anything.’

‘I meant—’

‘I know, Ley. We’ll clean up later. Zygmunt here has things on his mind.’

Leyla brought the secum in heated drinking kettles. Culzean sipped, and arched his back a little to relieve the pressure on his raw tattoos. ‘What’s on your mind, Zygmunt Molotch?’

Molotch smiled. His smile, like his face, was woefully asymmetrical. ‘Let me begin by saying I am in your debt. There’s no question about that. You pulled me out of Petropolis when my plans came apart, and for six months you have protected me. I was telling Leyla this earlier. I owe you and I appreciate it. There’s no guile here. When I can, I will reward you handsomely.’

Culzean nodded politely. ‘And the “but” is?’

‘I fear we are about to clash, you and I,’ said Molotch. ‘I broach this topic in the hope that we can avoid such an eventuality. But we will clash, sooner or later.’

‘Your reasoning?’

‘By any reasonable scale, I am an abnormal intellect. An alpha, a plus alpha. With due respect, judging from the time we have spent together, I see you are too.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You are a genius, Orfeo. The Cognitae would have been proud to own you.’

‘Again, thank you. Are you trying to get me into bed, Zygmunt?’

Leyla chuckled.

Smiling again, Molotch shook his head. ‘We are both manipulators, schemers, plotters. We both discern patterns where others see only nonsense. We can create and drive extravagantly complex ploys and see

them to fruition. In short, we are, I fear, too much alike for it to be healthy.'

Culzean sipped from his kettle again, and then set it down. 'I agree with everything you've said so far. Go on.'

'If we work together, we could do unimaginable things. But we are not together in this. You call the shots. You do not confide in me. To begin with, this was expedient. Now, it has become a handicap. There is a real danger we will conflict, and tear each other apart. What I'm saying is, we need to be frank with one another.'

'Frank is good.'

Molotch rose to his feet. 'I'm not playing, Culzean. Since Petropolis, I have been your cargo, your trophy. I am valuable to you. I imagine you could earn a tidy sum by delivering me to all manner of interested parties. That is something I would not tolerate.'

'Really?' asked Culzean, sitting back, aware that, behind him, Leyla Slade had risen quietly and Lucius Worna had taken a step closer. 'You know, Zygmunt, that sounds ungrateful. I pulled you out of the furnace, but now I'm not useful any more?'

'That's not what I meant.'

'That's how it sounds.'

'It sounds like it sounds. I believe we could do great works together. But as partners. Not like this.'

Culzean got up and faced Molotch. Slade closed in beside him. 'You are alive because I made it so,' Culzean said. 'You have evaded capture and execution because I made sure of your safety. I have watched over you, schemed to protect you. Worked hard to—'

'I understand—'

'Ravenor would—'

'Ravenor has been behind us every step of the way!' Molotch snarled. 'Every step! He has followed us and hunted us and haunted us everywhere we've gone these last six months! He—'

‘That’s the point,’ Culzean said, quietly.

‘What?’

‘That’s the point!’ It was one of the few times Leyla Slade had ever heard her master raise his voice.

‘Where better to hide than in that bastard’s shadow?’ Culzean asked softly. ‘You are the most wanted man in the sector, Zygmunt. Where do we go? In, towards the core? Not with your face on every tracking warrant and wanted list. What about out, into the Halo? No... because there’s nothing out there! All we could do is hide! To work our magic, you and me, we have to stay inside the system. That’s what I’ve been doing. Ghosting Ravenor’s every move. Staying in his shade, in his blind spot. Your great enemy is hiding us by his very presence.’

Molotch paused, frowning.

‘It wasn’t easy to do,’ said Culzean. ‘So show me some damn respect.’

Molotch took a step backwards. It was rare for him to be blindsided. He groaned. ‘Oh, Orfeo, this is precisely why we should be working together. Talking to each other. Your strategy with Ravenor is brilliant. I commend it. But you should have told me!’

‘Calm down,’ Leyla said. ‘Just calm down. Don’t make me draw on you twice in one day, Molotch.’

Molotch was too exasperated to be mollified. ‘Draw away, Leyla. You know what happened last time.’

Annoyed, Slade pulled her pistol and aimed it at the side of Molotch’s head.

‘Again with this,’ Molotch said, making that particular flicking gesture with his right arm. Slade’s weapon tumbled up into the air. He caught it.

Her left hand was aiming a las-blunt body pistol at him. ‘I learn,’ she said. Behind her, Lucius Worna had quietly unshipped his bolt pistol.

‘Oh, put them away, both of you,’ Molotch said sourly. He looked at Culzean. ‘We need to start sharing and cooperating right now.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I fear things have gone wrong.’

‘Wrong?’

‘Ignorant of your fine scheme and concerned with the situation, I have put plans of my own in motion. I fear they will now conflict with yours, and that conflict may harm us both.’

Culzean sighed. ‘Throne, Zyg, what have you done?’

As if on cue, the exclave’s outer gate bell chimed.

‘Visitor.’ said Leyla.

‘See to it,’ Culzean replied. Leyla holstered her las-blunt and caught her pistol as Molotch threw it. She locked it away and headed out of the room.

Culzean look at Molotch and repeated, ‘What have you done?’

‘I was looking after myself.’

‘Leave that to me.’

‘I will, if you keep me informed and remain open to my ideas. We have to work together or we’ll destroy one another.’

‘I heartily concur.’

Slade returned, trailed by a figure in a long grey storm cloak, the hood up.

‘A visitor for our guest,’ she said.

‘Probably not a great idea to entertain with a corpse on the floor,’ Worna rumbled, glaring at the dead inker.

‘I won’t stand on ceremony,’ said the hooded figure. The newcomer turned and faced Molotch. ‘This is a matter of the most pleasant fraternal confidence.’

Molotch smiled. The ancient Cognitae code greeting was like a lost, mournful echo to him. ‘And I stand ready, in confidence, for a knowing brother,’ he replied, as was the form.

‘Ravenor is quitting this world. His hunt is over,’ said the hooded figure.

‘Good news,’ Molotch replied.

‘There is just the final business to conclude,’ said the hooded figure.

‘Oh, Zygmunt, tell me. What the hell have you gone and done?’ Culzean whispered.

‘I have made a commitment that must now be honoured,’ Molotch said. ‘We must make the best of it.’ He stared at the hooded figure. ‘What remains?’

The man drew his hood down and shook out his long, white hair. ‘All that remains is the most dreadful amount of killing,’ said Interrogator Ballack.



FIVE

THEY MET IN the pavilion of a salon in the depths of Basteen. It was a genteel place, the haunt of fashionable society. Dressed in robes, in jewelled gowns, in all their finery, the grandees of Basteen came to the salon and others like it, to see and to be seen. Carriages and ground cars queued to deposit their passengers under the tented awning where lasdancers and contortionists performed in the twitching brazier light.

Inside, the place was lit by glow-globes and hanging lanterns. Each booth and dining table was screened off in its own tent of white silk, which magnified the lamp light and created a creamy luminosity like vellum. Silhouettes moved across the silk screens. There were the sounds of laughter, of conversation, of clinking glasses, of soft chamber music. The smells were of perfume and obscura, secum and hot, intense chocolate. Servitors hurried to and fro, bearing laden trays.

He took a booth on the right-hand side of the salon, and had ordered amasec and a pot of mud-thick dark chocolate when she arrived. ‘Drink?’ asked Nayl.

She shook her head. She was wearing a black velvet overgown, as rich and black as the night outside, a matching hat with a lace veil, and a stole of jet-dyed fur. She looked regal, like an empress, like the dowager governor of an ancient core world. ‘Sit, then.’

She sat on the satin upholstered couch across from him. Dainty laughter, prompted by some witty remark, peeled like bracelet bells through the white silk wall behind her. She reached her arms up, drew long silver pins out from behind her head, and removed her hat and veil. It was the most sexually charged disrobing he’d ever seen. ‘Will your master miss you?’ she asked.

‘What?’

‘Will your master miss you?’

‘Oh. No, not tonight. Too much on his plate. You?’

‘Fenx lets us out,’ Angharad replied.

‘Why did you want to meet with me?’

‘You knew my aunt. I would hear you speak of her.’ Nayl sipped at his amasec. It tasted like molten gold. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. ‘If that’s what you want,’ he said. Nayl felt vulnerable, and it wasn’t just the fact that he’d come unarmed because of the salon’s potent weapon scanners. When she’d told him where she wanted to meet, he’d been obliged to dress up. A grey linen coat and trousers, a white shirt of sathoni cloth. He felt ridiculous. He felt under dressed. He felt... not at all like Harlon Nayl.

He also felt as if he was committing some kind of betrayal, like an illicit affair. He hadn’t told anyone where he was going, especially not Ravenor, and he wasn’t quite sure why.

‘So, your aunt—’ he began.

‘Yes.’

‘Your aunt. Well, I knew her, but my master knew her better.’

‘Your master isn’t going to talk to me. Not openly. I need to know about the blade.’

‘The blade?’

‘Yes, the blade.’

‘Not your aunt?’

‘She died. The clan has come to terms with that. But the blade, Barbarisater. It must be reclaimed.’

‘Reclaimed?’ Nayl asked.

‘The steels belong to the clan. This is ancient law. Barbarisater must be reclaimed.’

‘Well, that’s tough. My master has it.’

‘Your master? Ravenor?’

‘No, uh... my previous master. Eisenhower.’ Nayl’s voice faltered.

‘Where is he?’

‘Lost. Long lost. Sorry. But I know the blade. Know it well. It cut me.’

An expression that he couldn’t read crossed Angharad’s face. She rose, holding the train of her overgown, and moved around the low table where the drinks and silver chocolate pot had been placed. She sat down on the couch beside him. She gazed at him. The golden buttons on her high-throated black gown came right up under her chin.

‘Where?’ she asked.

‘Where... sorry, what?’ he asked back.

‘Where did it cut you?’

‘Through the body, years ago. Right through me.’

Angharad leaned forward and kissed him. Her lips were wet and slippery. She took him by the hand and dragged him up from the couch.

‘Going well so far,’ he murmured.

She kissed him again. Lips locked, they rocked each other back and forth, knocking into the table with their legs, shivering the glasses. His amasec spilled. Her mouth was inhumanly hot, her tongue rapid like a wet snake.

‘Here? Really?’ he mumbled when their kiss finally parted.

A smile licked across her mouth like a flame across parchment. She gestured at the white silk walls around them and the flickering silhouettes cast upon them, with a casual flip of her black-gloved hand.

‘The salon prides itself on privacy and discretion,’ she said.

‘But the walls are thin. Just silk—’ he began.

‘Are you afraid?’

He nodded. Then they both laughed. They kissed again, bumping into the couch and the table.

‘Throne!’ he gasped.

She pulled off his coat and yanked open his shirt, tearing the seams apart.

‘Where?’ she demanded.

‘Gut level.’ he replied, moving against her. She ripped his shirt down further to expose his torso, slick with sweat.

‘Where?’

‘There!’ he whispered, pointing to the thumb-length, dark scar on his knotted lower abdomen, just above his hip.

She dropped to her knees in front of him.

‘Oh, well now...’ he sighed, blinking.

She kissed the scar. She lingered. Her tongue slid on his flesh. Then she stood again to face him.

‘You’re stopping there?’ he gulped.

Something chimed. She took out her vox.

‘My master summons me,’ she said.

‘Throne, really?’

‘Really.’

She turned and picked up her hat. ‘You shouldn’t be alive,’ she told him. ‘Carthaen steel. You are one of a very select group, Harlon. What we call *Wyla Esw Fauhn*, which means “spared by the genius”.’

‘Will I see you again?’ he asked, feeling foolish and fourteen the moment he said it.

Angharad smiled. The smile was predatory and thrilling to him.

‘Always,’ she said. Then she pulled back the silk drape and vanished.

Nayl sat down. A servitor peered in through the drape.

‘What may I fetch for you, master?’ it whirred.

‘An amasec. A large one. And also a fresh shirt.’ he replied.



SIX

‘THE HOBBLER BASTARD was right, then,’ muttered Inquisitor Fenx. ‘You have to hand it to him.’

‘You do, you really do,’ replied Ballack.

‘Here all the time,’ Fenx continued. He slid down out of the halted carriage into the gloomy side street. ‘And we laughed at his hunch.’

‘Ravenor is old and experienced,’ Ballack said, clambering out to join Fenx. ‘What was it he said? He has *faith*.’ Ballack spoke the word as if it was dirty. ‘He knows his business.’

‘I will have to make my apologies to him.’ Fenx decided. ‘Glory Myzard will have to make her apologies too. Now I understand why he’s so highly regarded.’ Fenx looked at Ballack.

‘Provided, of course, that this is confirmed. This is confirmed, I take it?’ ‘The intelligence is immaculate,’ said Ballack. ‘Gathered from eight separate spy units, and corroborated by gene sensors. Molotch is here.’ ‘We have him cold?’ ‘We have him cold, sir.’

Fenx torched up the power to his black body armour. There was a whine, gathering in pitch. Green signal lights lit off around his high collar. He unshipped his bolter and racked it twice. ‘Bring them up,’ he ordered.

Interrogator Ballack nodded. The others dismounted from the waiting carriages. D’mal Singh and her gunhounds, Shugurth, Claudel, Mentator. ‘Where’s Angharad?’ Fenx asked. ‘On her way. She’s signalled.’

Fenx shook his head. ‘We can’t wait for her. Not with the target in sniffing range. We commence.’

‘We commence!’ Ballack called to the waiting figures.

‘Not like that,’ grumbled Tarkos Mentator, the old savant. He hobbled forward on his cane. ‘Not with firearms.’

‘What?’ Fenx spat.

Mentator shrugged as if in the most humble of apologies. He aimed a palsied hand at the dark building before them. ‘Your prey, sir, has made his nest in a house of generation. Public generation 987, to be accurate, serving the western district of Basteen. Quite apart from the power cells contained in this place, there are volatile chemicals held in suspension. Use of firearms would be a very bad idea.’

‘Because?’ Fenx asked. He caught himself. He was sounding stupid. ‘Because we’ll blow ourselves to hell, right. Thank you, savant.’ He holstered his bolter. ‘Muzzle your firearms!’ he ordered, drawing a short, curved sword.

Claudel put away her plasma pistol and pulled out two bloodletting sickles, one in each hand. Cursing, Shugurth patiently detached his cannon from his shoulder socket, put it back in the carriage, and hefted up a war axe with a long, knurled grip.

‘Guns, no!’ D’mal Singh instructed her whining hounds. Their weapon systems deactivated and withdrew. ‘Teeth, good!’ she said. They chomped and clacked their razor edged jaws, growling.

Ballack had drawn a rapier and a matching poniard.

‘Commence,’ snapped Fenx, walking towards the building. ‘Bonus pay to the one who brings me Molotch’s head.’

THE CORPSE LAY face down in the dark on the cold steel decking.

‘Where did you procure the cadaver?’ Molotch asked.

‘It’s the inker you killed.’ Worna said. ‘We needed a body and we had one lying around. Not a great likeness, but then who knows what you look like any more?’

‘Will it suffice?’

Lucius Worna, massive and massively scarred in his chipped power armour, nodded. ‘I had it typed and matched to your gene, palm and retina. They won’t know the difference.’

‘End of story?’ Molotch asked the giant bounty hunter.

Worna smiled. 'End of story.'

'That sort of typing and gene-scripting costs dearly,' Leyla Slade said.

'It costs what it costs,' Orfeo Culzean replied. 'Are we all ready? Zygmunt, you know how this has to work?'

'I know, Orfeo. I truly know. Consider this recompense for my mistake.'

'I will. I do. But Ballack—'

'Leave Ballack to me,' Molotch replied.

Warning runes lit up on Leyla Slade's auspex grid. 'Door four and door seven!' she hissed. 'Here they come.' She rose in one fluid movement from her cross-legged position on the deck and drew a stabbing sword. Lucius Worna moved forward beside her, a warhammer resting across his shoulder plate.

Molotch stepped in front of them. 'May I crave a favour? From you, Lucius, and you, Leyla? May I do this?'

'You'll need support,' growled Worna.

'No, I won't. But if I do, you won't be far away, will you?'

Worna shrugged, a tectonic gesture of his powered plate.

'Let me do this,' Molotch insisted. 'Let me enjoy this.'

'Let him,' said Culzean.

Leyla Slade grinned and offered the grip of her blade to Molotch.

'I won't need that,' he said. He turned, and vanished into the shadows.

THE HOUSE OF generation was very large, with a high roof and deep pockets of darkness. The main body of the hall was lined with generator hubs throbbing in the half-dark. The light was violet, dim. Fenx's team moved in, whisper quiet, spreading out between the aisles of humming hub units, slipping from shadow to shadow.

Bringing up the rear, Tarkos Mentator shuffled along on his cane. He let the others do the real work, the violence. He was only there to advise.

'Bad place for a fight,' a voice whispered in his ear.

‘It is,’ Mentator agreed lightly, then caught himself. He was suddenly terrified. Someone was walking along just behind him. Just a shadow, just a shape at his shoulder.

‘I am reminded of *Purlingerius*, in the third act. The choral requiem,’ the voice suggested. ‘What is it again? “A man must choose his final resting place, as befits his soul.” Quite magnificent.’

‘Ah, I see you know your Stradhal,’ Mentator answered timidly.

‘Know it well,’ the voice replied. ‘You like opera, then?’

‘I do.’

‘So do I. Stradhal. Jevoith. Carnathi, apart from the awful final works.’

‘Oh, they are awful, aren’t they?’ Mentator agreed. Fear was almost choking him.

‘Are you afraid of me?’ the voice beside him whispered.

‘Yes, yes I am,’ Mentator answered, ‘very much.’

‘You want to cry out to the others, don’t you?’

‘Y-yes.’

‘But you dare not raise your voice, do you?’

‘N-no.’

‘You know who I am?’

‘I... I can guess.’

‘I think you guess right, my friend. If you did cry out, well then... things would become very painful and awkward for you. But I’d hate for that to happen to a fellow appreciator of the operatic art. Why don’t we just walk for a while, side-by-side, you and me? We could discuss Stradhal some more.’

‘Well...’

‘That would be all right then, wouldn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

They walked on a little further.

‘I’m about to be attacked,’ said the voice calmly. ‘Try to remember not to cry out.’

Mentator nodded.

A shadow moved suddenly. Interrogator Claudel pounced on them from behind a turbine hub. Her sickles were swinging, flashing like ice in the gloom. They did not connect.

‘Claudel,’ Molotch said.

‘What?’ She faltered, robbed of action by the tone of command. His fingers stabbed into her throat and she died. Molotch caught her falling body and carried it down to the ground gently. He picked up her sickles.

‘Oh Throne, you have slain her!’ Mentator stammered.

‘Yes, I have.’

‘Oh Throne! Oh Throne!’ His voice started to rise. ‘Remember what I said,’ Molotch warned. ‘Fenx! He’s here!’ Mentator yelled. ‘He’s here!’

‘Oh dear me. I thought we had an understanding,’ said Molotch. The sickles flashed.

INQUISITOR FENX HEARD the savant’s urgent cry, cut off short. He ran back down the aisle of the turbine hall.

Claudel lay quiet and still on the decking, as if asleep. Behind her, Tarkos Mentator was curled in a foetal knot, his robes soaked black with blood.

‘Throne!’ Fenx growled. ‘How did—’

‘That happen?’ Molotch finished for him.

Fenx swept around at the sound of the voice, but his sword sliced into empty shadows. Misdirection was Molotch’s favourite game. He threw his voice well.

There was a blunt crack of bone. Fenx staggered backwards, bumping sidelong into the nearest hub. One of Claudel’s sickles transfixed his skull, the handle jutting up from the crown of his head.

Fenx fell back against the hub and slid down until he was almost flat on the floor. He opened his mouth and blood trickled down his chin. The light in his eyes went out and his face went slack.

Molotch turned from Fenx's corpse as a wail of misery echoed down the aisle behind him. D'mal Singh stood twenty metres away, the gun-hounds at her side. She gazed at Molotch in anguish and hatred.

'Murderer...' she gulped.

'Murderer...' he echoed quietly, not for sense, but to practise the timbre of her intonation.

'Kill, good!' she snarled.

The gunhounds took off towards Molotch. They were heavy and powerful, their scrambling paws slapping on the deck, their iron claws scraping. Their razor jaws opened.

'Kill, good...' Molotch murmured, getting a true measure of D'mal Singh's palate and tone. Gunhounds of this model were voice-controlled, specifically keyed to their owner's voice pattern.

A voice pattern he now used, perfectly. 'Down, good!'

Five metres short of him, the gunhounds skidded to a halt and lay supine, whimpering, resting their chins on their forepaws.

Molotch smiled. He saw the look of bafflement and horror cross the small woman's face. Confused, she was vulnerable to the tone of command.

'D'mal Singh,' he called. 'Mute.'

She opened her mouth to command her hounds again. No sound came out. She gaped, her jaw moving uselessly.

There was no time to enjoy her helpless state. Molotch felt a presence at his back, heard a heavy step. The ogryn. The ogryn was coming up behind him. He had a second or less to react.

Molotch threw himself forward between the gunhounds. The ogryn's axe crashed down into the deck where he had just been standing. As he dived, he hurled the remaining sickle. Spinning, chopping through the air like a fan, the sickle flew in a horizontal arc and smashed D'mal Singh clean off her feet.

Her body landed on its back with a thump and a violent, loose-limbed bounce.

Shugurth howled, yanked his axe-head up out of the punctured deck, and charged. Molotch leapt up, rotating to confront him.

‘Kill, good!’ he ordered in D’mal Singh’s voice.

The gunhounds ploughed forward either side of him to meet the charging ogryn. They slammed into Shugurth with an impact that arrested his forward motion, and brought him down hard on his back. Then they were on top of him. To his credit, the ogryn didn’t cry out much, even though his death was drawn out and messy.

Molotch turned and walked away from the sounds of slavering chops and cracking bone.

‘You can come out now, Ballack,’ he suggested casually.

Interrogator Ballack stepped into the open. His sword and dagger were both drawn.

‘Well, aren’t you quite the psycho bastard?’ Ballack said, his longer blade rising to touch Molotch’s throat.

‘I am, I really am. You can put that away, Gall. We’re done.’

Ballack sheathed his sword with a nod. ‘Of course we are. That was just for show.’ He flipped his dagger over in his other hand and tucked it into its scabbard.

‘It’s all just for show,’ Molotch agreed. ‘You are quite treacherous, Ballack.’

Ballack bowed and smiled. ‘It is a matter of the most pleasant fraternal confidence.’

‘How did an alumnus of the Cognitae end up in the ordos?’ Molotch asked.

‘Where else could I do most good?’ Ballack asked.

‘Your efforts are noted,’ said Molotch. ‘Now all that’s left is to make this look convincing.’

‘I’ll make the report, of course. The others died trying to bring you down.’

‘Naturally.’

‘You have a corpse prepared?’

Molotch nodded. ‘I left it over there,’ he said, pointing to their left.

‘And it will convince the most scrupulous tests?’

‘It will. Especially given the fact it will be extensively burned. A stray shot during the battle...’

Ballack smiled approvingly. ‘That will conceal a multitude of sins.’

‘Yours included.’ said Molotch. He brushed against Ballack so fleetingly, the interrogator didn’t understand what was happening until it had happened. There was a metallic clack as the handcuffs locked into place. Ballack suddenly found his left wrist cuffed tight against the casing of a turbine hub.

‘Molotch? What... what is this?’

‘This is goodbye, Ballack.’

‘Molotch!’ Ballack screamed. ‘Molotch!’

SHE REACHED THE dark side street where Fenx’s carriages were parked. There was no sign of anyone around. The last message she had received had informed her that the team was deploying into the house of generation across the street.

Something was wrong. Very wrong. She was getting only a dead response from her body-to-body comm. A trickle of dead air.

‘Fenx? Sir?’

Vox static.

Angharad stripped off the rest of her formal black dress, tossed it aside, and cinched tight the straps and buckles of the form-fitting leather armour she was wearing underneath. Her clan armour. There was no time to find the cloak. She eased the Carthaen steel out of its long case.

She prowled across the empty street, the steel in her hands quivering like a diviner’s rod. Overhead, the stars were cold smudges of light in a purple sky. Two of Tancred’s moons were aloft, both claw shapes. Killing moons. A good omen, or a bad one, depending on who survived to see the following sunrise.

Under the eaves of the great building, it was as black as a cavern. She heard a distant sob from within, a stifled croak of pain. She pushed open the outer door and immediately smelled blood on the close air inside.

Evisorex smelled it too. Holding the long sword in a tight, raised grip, she stepped across the threshold and made her way into the turbine hall.

Silence. Darkness.

Ten seconds later, with a catastrophic roar, a tidal wave of boiling, golden flame blew out through all the windows and doors.



SEVEN

KARA HAD WALKED the long way around, through the recreational gardens where the gentlewomen of the city came in their long dresses and tall hats to sit under the trees and make civilised conversation, around the ornamental lake, and up through the patchwork of lesser shrines and chapel houses where the pilgrims queued. The temple of Saint Karyl sat on a shelf of dark volcanic rock at the western edge of Basteen, a white dome rising above the mosaic of red-brick buildings in the bright afternoon heat. Priests were calling the faithful to worship, and peddlers were hawking their votive trinkets from handcarts. Ritual banners hung limp against an indolent yellow sky.

She entered the temple through the western porch, and walked around the back of the vast church, relishing the stone cool. A small congregation was gathering at the altar rail, and their voices were muted echoes in the magnificent, spacious emptiness: motes of human life in a giant cave of stone.

She went through into the side chapel, a round chamber set off from the main body of the temple, where candles fluttered on a brass stand below high windows.

She knelt at the rail, and addressed a quiet prayer to the God-Emperor. It still seemed strange to her that she had found her faith again after so long. These days, she felt incomplete if she didn't go to temple or make some devotion regularly. Belknap had reawakened the need in her to begin with, but it was more than that now. She touched the silver aquila he had given her.

'Why here?' asked Carl Thonius.

She hadn't heard him enter. He didn't seem to have footsteps any more.

‘Hello, Carl.’

‘Why here, Kara?’ He gazed up at the arched, painted roof of the ancient chapel.

‘Privacy,’ she said. It was a half-truth. Part of her had wanted to see if he could set foot in a place like this.

Carl smiled slightly. He looked directly at her with amused eyes. ‘Privacy?’

‘We need to talk.’ Kara said, rising to her feet.

He feigned confusion. ‘About what?’

‘Don’t, Carl,’ she said. He frightened her, especially when they were alone together. And he knew it.

‘About me, I suppose?’ he mocked. ‘It’s all “me, me, me” with you, isn’t it?’

‘We’re leaving Tancred,’ Kara said.

‘Yes, tomorrow. That’s what he told me.’

‘Our efforts here are done. We’re returning to Eustis Majoris. A new start.’

‘Of sorts. Why?’

Kara hesitated. ‘Carl, I love you. Like a brother, I love you.’

‘Only like a brother?’ Carl asked playfully.

‘You annoy me, and aggravate me, and most of the time I don’t like you, but I would die for you. So, yes, like a brother.’

‘Well, that’s nice to know,’ he said. ‘I love you too.’ He turned towards the doorway, as if to leave. ‘Are we done?’

‘I can’t do this any more, Carl.’

‘Can’t do what?’ he asked, halting, but not looking back.

‘Lie for you. Lie about you. Cover for you.’

Carl Thonius turned, slowly. He stared at her. He looked as if he might be about to burst into tears.

‘But you promised,’ he said. There was such a plaintive tone in his voice.

‘You made me promise. That’s different.’

‘There was no compulsion. I didn’t pressure you.’

‘You did. You have, and I can’t do it any more.’

Thonius licked his lips and cleared his throat. ‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘What are you saying?’ he asked.

‘I can’t lie to Gideon any more. I can’t keep lying to him, to any of them. I owe them all too much to keep doing that. You asked for time, just a little time to beat this yourself, and I gave you that. I shouldn’t have done, but I did. I can’t give you any more. We have to tell Ravenor... have to tell Ravenor.’

His voice diminished to a tiny whisper. ‘Just a little longer. A tiny bit longer, I beg you. Please. I have been working, researching. I have found things, charms and incantations. I have found wards and bindings that—’

‘No, Carl. It’s not fair on me. Actually, it’s not fair on you either. He can help you. If I tell him, he can help you.’

‘He’ll kill me, Kara,’ Carl said softly.

‘No.’

‘He wouldn’t have a choice.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘He’d kill you too,’ Carl said.

There was a long silence. Plainsong began in the main chapel outside.

‘What did you say?’ she asked.

‘Don’t be naive,’ Carl said. ‘You’ve known all this time and you’ve kept it a secret. You’re tainted too. He’d kill you. He’d have to. He couldn’t trust you, ever again.’

‘You’re wrong,’ she said. ‘Wrong on both counts. He’d help you, and he’d understand my position.’

‘Would he?’ asked Carl, sarcasm straining his voice. ‘Let’s review... Inquisitor Ravenor’s own interrogator has become the vessel of a warp-thing, and not just any warp-thing, but an apocalyptic daemon of infamous prophecy. But Ravenor doesn’t know, even though the secret has been right

there, for months, in front of his nose. And, wait for it, the only other person who knows is one of his most trusted and oldest friends. Unless that story ends with “...and the moment he found out, he executed them both” it’s not going to sit well when Ravenor is brought before the High Elders of the Inquisition Helican. I mean, *is* it?’

She shook her head.

‘Do you want to die, Kara?’ he asked.

She took a step back.

‘That wasn’t a threat. I’m not threatening you. Throne! I just asked the question...’

‘No, Carl, I don’t, but I want to do what’s right.’

‘So do I,’ he said. He was scratching at his right hand – *the* hand – as if it was starting to bother him. So many rings wound around those fingers. Kara watched him, her heart rate rising. *That hand...*

‘It’s hot in here,’ he said.

‘No, Carl, it’s quite cool.’

‘I’m hot.’ He walked across to the chapel’s stone basin and washed his face in the holy water. She was amazed the water didn’t spit and boil on contact with his right hand.

‘I’m tired,’ he said, once he was done. ‘I understand what you’re saying, because I’m tired of it as well. The deceit. The fear. And, for me, the pain. It hurts, you know.’

‘I’m sorry it does.’

‘Every morning, waking and remembering, every night praying the dreams don’t come. And they always do.’

‘Carl—’

‘Listen to me. If I am... cursed, Kara Swole, if I have evil ticking away inside me, then what kind of evil is it? It’s been months, and I have controlled it. I have contained it. There has been no outburst. No one has died. And I beg you to remember, on Eustis Majoris, the thing inside me...

it helped. It defeated Molotch. Kara, it took the sickness out of you. It saved you.'

'I know.'

'Then what?'

'I have to—'

'No! No, no! Listen to me! I've thought about this a lot. I think it's... a blessing.'

'Please, Carl, don't try to turn this—'

'Listen to me!' he hissed. She closed her mouth. 'Sorry,' he smiled. 'I didn't mean to snap, but I really have thought about this. To begin with, it was a problem. A dirty, nasty secret. I thought I would die. All I wanted to be was free of it. Free of... Slyte.'

'Don't say that word.'

He shrugged. 'Sorry. Again, sorry. Come closer.'

'No, Carl.'

'Come closer,' he insisted, gesturing with his left hand. 'I won't hurt you. I couldn't. That's the point. I'm not excusing my state, but what if it's more than just a curse?'

'I don't know what you mean, Carl,' she said, stepping slowly towards him and looking into his eyes. He was crying for real now. Tears ran down his pale cheeks.

He held out his left hand to her and she took it. He pulled her, very gently, close to him. 'What if this is a rare thing? Something we've never seen before? I have a daemon in me, but it is subdued. Imagine that! Subordinate to my will. I own its power, but I am not in its thrall. I can use its power.'

'You're fooling yourself,' Kara whispered.

'What if I'm not? What if I have the fury of a daemon at my disposal, the insight of the warp, but remain pure and true? What a transcendent asset would that be to mankind? What a miracle! Think of the secrets we could learn! I could be something our species has waited millennia for. A man

with the mastery of daemons. A rational man with true insight into the warp. Kara, the Imperium would change. The warp would no longer threaten us as such an implacable—'

'Carl! Carl, please! How many other men have thought the selfsame thing? Slow or fast, the warp is always poison. This is basic to our understanding. I applaud the fact you've kept it contained for so long, but you can't keep it in forever.'

'I don't want to keep it in. Kara, I feel, I really feel, that this is a momentous thing. A daemon slaved to order. An ancient enemy, turned against the darkness. You must give me more time.'

'No, Carl—'

'More time! I can do this! I have mastered it and I can formulate that mastery so that others can do it too. We can change all creation, Kara. For the good of mankind, we can change thinking and change action, and banish forever our fear of the dark.'

'It's too late, Carl.'

He sighed. He bowed his head. 'Throne, you're right,' he said in a very quiet voice. 'Of course you're right. I'm a fool. Forgive me for all of this. Forgive me for putting you in this situation. You're right.'

'Carl—'

'I'll tell him. I'll tell him myself. Will you let me do that? Please?'

'Of course.'

'I'll come clean. Make him understand it was me all along. I'll protect you. Just let me be the one to tell him.'

'All right. Yes. When?'

'Tonight,' Carl said. He smiled sadly. 'Oh, Kara, the stuff you know.'

He pulled her close and they embraced in silence for a long time.

'So, tonight?' he asked.

'Tonight, what?'

'That's when I'll tell him.'

'Tell who what?' she asked.

‘I’ll tell Ravenor all about it,’

‘About what?’

‘Now, you see?’ he grinned. ‘Isn’t that better?’

She laughed. She wasn’t sure why. ‘What were we talking about?’

‘Faith,’ he said.

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Faith gives us purpose, and a mind without purpose will walk in dark places.’

‘That sounds familiar. Is it a quote?’

‘I just made it up.’ Carl said.

‘We should go back. It’s late.’ Kara said.

‘We should. I’m glad we had this talk, Kara. You were right to keep it private.’

He took her by the hand and led her towards the door.

Patience Kys was standing in the doorway. ‘This is nice,’ she remarked.

‘What are you doing here?’ Kara laughed.

‘I was looking for you both. Your comms are off.’

‘Sorry,’ said Kara, adjusting her link.

‘How long have you been there?’ Carl asked.

‘Long enough to wonder if Belknap should be worried,’ Kys replied.

Kara laughed again. ‘Carl just wanted me to show him where I made devotion. I think there are stirrings of faith in our friend here.’

‘Fancy,’ said Kys.

‘It’s true, it’s true,’ chuckled Carl. ‘I’ve grown slack of late, and I’ll never make inquisitor without a good record of temple attendance. Kara was just guiding me. I needed a little spiritual focus.’

Patience Kys nodded. ‘Don’t we all? There’s been a development.’

‘What kind of development?’

‘The kind you wouldn’t believe, but Ravenor has to tell you himself. He’d hate me if I ruined his thunder.’

They walked towards the doorway. 'What's that?' Kys asked.

Several curls of bent metal lay on the chapel floor, beside the basin. Tiny bent scraps, like the remains of rings that had been split apart.

'Just votive offerings,' Carl said. He took Kara's hand in his, her left in his right, and led the way out of the chapel.

There were no longer any rings on his right hand.



EIGHT

WHEN THEY ARRIVED back at the house, evening was falling and Envoy Myzard was just leaving. She stomped past them in the courtyard, flanked by two heavy weapons servitors, heading for her transport.

‘A good man you have there,’ she said to Thonius.

‘Ma’am?’

‘I’ve just been rendering my apologies to him. I won’t underestimate him again. Get him back to Eustis, interrogator. Get him back on the job. His mind can be uncluttered now.’

As they walked up the steps into the house, they heard the engines of her transport growling as it trundled away.

Nayl, Plyton, Belknap, Unwerth and the manhound Fyflank were waiting in the inner hall.

Kara walked up to Belknap and kissed him.

‘What’s going on?’

‘Where were you?’

‘At temple. What’s going on?’

‘I’m not sure. But Molotch’s dead.’

‘What?’

Impelled by a powerful mind, the double doors at the end of the hall opened and Ravenor glided in to face them.

‘Sir?’ asked Thonius.

‘It’s done. We’re done,’ Ravenor said via his voxsponder.

‘We’re still leaving?’ asked Nayl.

‘Yes, Harlon. We’re still leaving, but we can leave happy that there are no more loose ends. Last night, three precincts away, Zygmunt Molotch was

located, cornered and slain by Myzard's forces.'

There was a general commotion. Nayl smacked his raised palm against Kys's.

'So, you were right?' Kara grinned.

'I was right,' Ravenor replied. 'My hunch was correct. Molotch was here, just as I suspected. I'm only sorry it wasn't us who claimed him in the end.'

'The bastard's dead!' Nayl chuckled. He did a little dance that made Belknap and Plyton laugh.

'I can't believe it,' murmured Kys. 'All this time, all this time, and now it's done.'

'It's over,' said Ravenor. 'We have no excuses any more. Eustis Majoris awaits. I'd like us to leave tomorrow, as arranged.'

'Who got him?' asked Belknap. It was a good question, and Ravenor was surprised it was Belknap who asked it. The others fell silent.

Ravenor had swung his chair away. Now he slowly turned to face them. 'Ballack, it appears. It was bloody, at the end, so Myzard told me. There were losses.'

'Losses?' Nayl echoed. He suddenly had the most awful sense of premonition. He felt sick.

'Fenx tracked him to a house of generation,' said Ravenor slowly. His voxsponder fumbled with the pace of his words. The monotone made it all the more horrible. 'There was a fight. Molotch did for most of Fenx's people, then a stray shot ignited the volatiles and the place went up. Molotch's corpse was identified by gene-fix.'

'Glory!' Thonius whistled.

'Who... who died?' Nayl asked.

'Fenx, Ballack, Claudel,' Ravenor replied, 'the ogryn, Mentator, the gunhound woman, and the Carthaen, Angharad.'

'Dead?'

'All of them.'

THEY WERE CLEARING out the house and making ready to head for the port on the transports. Ravenor had gone ahead, with Kys, Belknap and Kara. Sholto Unwerth and his manhound had left earlier that morning to light the ship's engines. Frauka was travelling with Zael in a secure buggy.

Porters were rolling the last of the luggage out to the carriages. Carl Thonius stood in the yard, finalising their dealings with the tattooed letting agent. Harlon Nayl did a last circuit, checking the empty rooms one by one.

'Harl?'

'Hello?' Nayl stuck his head out of the vacant room he had been inspecting. Maud Plyton was jogging up the staircase. She had a piece of paper in her hand.

'Message for you.'

'Message?'

'Came in by closed vox about ten minutes ago. Last thing Carl fielded before he shut the system down.'

Nayl took the slip from her and opened it.

'Problem?' Plyton asked.

'Why do you ask?'

'Uh, the look on your face?'

'No, no problem,' he said. 'Get going.'

Maud nodded and hurried away. He waited until she was gone, and then read the slip again.

It was from an unrecorded source, anonymous.

It read, 'Spared by the genius.'

Nayl stared at it for a long time. Then he took out his link.

PART TWO

THE WYCH HOUSE OF
UTOCHRE



ONE

THE DOOR IS half open. The door is old and made of wood. A very ordinary old door in a very ordinary frame. It swings hack and forth slowly on its hinges, pushed and pulled by a wind that comes from neither side of the door, a wind that comes from somewhere else. The door is waiting...

THE FACTOR'S NAME was Stine. This piece of information emerged early on in what turned out to be over twenty minutes of loquacious preamble. Stine liked to talk. It was part of his performance.

+Stick with it.+

Every factor they had made approaches to (every factor in every hall in Berynth, most likely) had his own version of the performance, some variation of the mercantile courtship dance, the wooing of the customer. It was all part of the purchasing experience. Customers expected it.

There would be a warm greeting, a guided stroll from the reception chamber into the factor's display rooms, an offer of refreshments and a steady, light flow of conversation leading to a more specific extolment of the merits and traditions of the hall the customer had chosen to patronise. Certain themes were developed by the factor, with practiced verbal skill, designed to snag in the customer's thoughts and stay there: luxury, exclusivity, quality. The customer was, after all, going to spend a great deal of currency.

And the customer wasn't a customer. That was too coarse a term. He or she was an emptor. Just as the factor wasn't a salesman or a shopkeeper. There were standards of decorum in Berynth.

+He's going on and on and on.+

+Stick with it.+

Stine had met her at reception. The hall stood at the northern end of the Promenade St Jakob, an area of up-hive Berynth densely and famously packed with noted hall premises. The deep street-stacks outside were tiered with ouslite walkways and black iron railings, and strung with thimble lamps, a cavernously dark place of rising black towers, some of which grew up through the hive's great armoured roof like a sea urchin's thorns. He wore a patterned coat and a practiced smile. Reception was a wide, inviting vault panelled in varnished wood.

Stine had bowed and led her back through the show galleries into the main chamber of display. Pools of emerald light contained glass showcases in the gloom. The floor was panelled with bronze slabs, and centuries of footsteps had worn a bright patina pathway across them. There was a simple wooden desk, faced by some leather sofas, and he invited her to sit down. Stine talked all the way. His performance, it seemed, would be all about words. Some of the factors she had so far encountered favoured a discreet approach, or a humble one, or allowed the emptor to lead the conversation. He was prolix. He, said Stine, was the ninetieth Stine, uninterrupted, to serve in the post of factor for Stine and Stine's Hall. That was a legacy, a family business. Stines had been at Berynth for sixteen centuries. The hall was one of the oldest, their marks amongst the most noteworthy in the sector.

'Here,' said Stine, 'you may admire the hall's marks, on this trinket.' He held it up in front of a magnifying viewer for her to inspect. His hands were overly pale and well manicured, looming in the lens. The trinket had more pearls in it than some oceans. 'The Stine mark.'

'I see it repeated, in stylised form, upon your doublet coat,' the emptor remarked.

Stine simpered, delighted that she should notice. He complimented her, extensively, on her eye and her intelligence.

+I think he wants to marry me.+

+Shush. Stick with it.+

Stine was very taken with this particular emptor: an elegant woman, well dressed, moneyed. Custom had been slack in the last few weeks, with few clients of note delivered by ferry ship to inspect the halls.

This woman was something different. She had taste. She was beautiful, if you liked that kind of thing.

He was telling her a little more about the business, about the fact that he was not as accomplished in the lapidary work as his many brothers, which is why he was the factor. He left the skilled lapidary to his kin, who could ‘assay and value’, so he boasted, with their bare hands.

But he sensed she was becoming bored. That happened. She had stopped sipping the amasec he had fetched out on a lacquered tray, and she no longer picked at the candied ginger in the little finger bowl. A good factor noticed these details. A good factor knew when to up the tempo and move the courtship towards the consummation of purchase.

‘Are you looking for a particular piece?’ he asked, walking around the simple hardwood desk with its velvet panels. He took out his keys and opened the doors of the nearest plate glass displays. Recessed fans murmured in the invisible ceiling of the chamber of display. It was a comfortable twenty-two degrees, with the right amount of humidity and air-flow to keep emptors fresh and relaxed. Outside Berynth, it was a murderous sixty below.

‘I am,’ said the emptor, sitting back on one of the leather sofas and crossing her long legs. ‘Or rather, a particular piece for a particular purpose. A society wedding on Gudrun. I won’t use names—’

‘Of course not!’ the factor said with a bow.

The emptor smiled. ‘But the match involves some people of influence. Of blood.’

‘I understand.’

‘The son of a governor subsector.’

‘My word!’

+Oh, try to stay in the realms of reality, please!+

‘Shut up.’

‘Pardon?’ asked the factor with a slightly bewitched blink.

‘Nothing. I said, my niece... the bride... deserves something special.’

The factor bowed again. ‘I do understand. And, if I may make so bold, financially...?’

He let the deadly word hang.

She shrugged. ‘Nothing less than a quarter million,’ she said mildly.

For the third time, he bowed. ‘Oh, ma’am. I have a few trinkets that may well please your eye and your taste.’

+I think I just made him *very* happy.+

+Well, that’s all he’s getting. I’m not paying for a quarter million crowns’ worth of anything.+

+Except information?+

+Except that.+

She kept her grin fixed. Oblivious, the factor began to lift red satin trays out of the display cases. Several servitors appeared from the shadows, took each tray as he lifted them out, and brought them over to her, holding them so as to display them. The servitors were old and worn, but of great mechanical quality. She realised that the hall cultivated a slightly worn, slightly Spartan feel, so that the pieces would glow by comparison. It was all very clever, very judged.

‘A design for the throat is always appreciated. These on the first trays are allochromatic zalachite, with red gold. I have them in diamond too. Cabochon cut is usually preferred.’

‘They’re delicious.’

‘Or a jewel setting for the brow? Sapphire, with opal and signet. Black silver or chased adamite are very sought after.’

‘This one is nice,’ the emptor said.

The factor came over, lifting the piece from its tray with a midwife’s care. The jewels shone in the light. The lights above the desk were well placed to make jewels scintillate at that particular point in the chamber.

‘The chrysoberyl? Yes, a favourite of mine. Note the glorious asterism. Would you like...?’ he asked, holding it up.

‘Please.’

‘Glass!’ the factor called, and other servitors hurried forward, holding up looking glasses all around the client. The factor placed the necklace around the emptor’s throat and fastened it.

She admired herself.

‘Has she your colouring?’

‘I am somewhat paler than my niece,’ the emptor said.

‘Then something with cygate or quofire? Tourmaline, perhaps? I have a pendalogue-cut tourmaline with the most stunning dichroic properties.’

‘You know your business, sir.’

She tried on three or four more pieces. The servitors held the looking glasses perfectly still.

‘I worry,’ she said, at length, ‘this is a nuptial gift. It should be for the groom as much as the bride. He is my brother’s son, after all.’

The factor paused. ‘And the bride is your niece?’

‘Did I say that?’

+You said that.+

‘You said that, I’m sure.’

‘By marriage, I mean. You know how it is, in the dynastic melee that is court life.’

‘Court... life?’

‘Yes,’ she replied.+Did I get away with that?+

+He’s too awestruck to notice. Play up the court thing. He thinks you’re anonymous nobility.+

‘I really don’t like to talk about it,’ the emptor said.

‘Of course not. Well, perhaps I can show you some of our ornamental settings? Horologs, rosettes, Imperial aquilas. For aquilas, we favour gold and composites, and also organic gems. The oceans here on Utochre produce the most iridescent nacre effects.’

‘You have a charter to produce authentic aquilas?’

‘We are Imperial jewellers, of course. By appointment.’

‘Show on,’ she said.

He displayed several more complex objects to her. Some were so valuable he had to silently lock the suspension shields around the desk while she admired them.

‘This is really stunning work,’ she murmured, turning a piece over in her hands. She held it up to the light. ‘What do you call this property?’

‘Birefringence, or double refraction.’ Stine replied.

‘Oh, I can’t decide.’

The factor smiled warmly.

‘I just can’t decide. I feel... incoherent.’

The factor’s smile froze and became cold.

‘What?’

‘I feel incoherent. Can you help me with that?’

The factor took the piece out of her hands and put it back on its satin tray. ‘Did I say something wrong?’ the emptor asked, slightly taken aback.

+Yes, I think you did. He’s not happy. Make your apologies and get out.+

‘We don’t cater for that sort of thing here.’ Stine said sniffily. ‘You’ve been wasting my time. Perhaps you’d like to leave.’ The factor was angry with himself. It wasn’t often he misread an emptor so completely.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, rising. ‘I didn’t mean offence.’

‘Please leave,’ Stine spat. He took a control wand from his belt and waved it briskly. All the servitors retreated obediently back into the shadows.

+Get out.+

‘I meant no offence,’ she repeated. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Your kind are always sorry,’ said Stine. ‘I should report you.’

‘Report me to whom?’ she asked.

+Get out, Patience. Now. We can’t afford an incident.+

Stine turned to look at her. His face was hard, poisonous. ‘You come in here, into this distinguished hall, looking for access to that ungodly place! Stine and Stine does not do that sort of thing!’

‘I have apologised. I have apologised sincerely, sir.’

+Patience...+

‘I should call the magistrates,’ Stine blustered. He waved the control wand he had taken from his belt again, reaching into the air for a hive-hub connection. She heard the buzz of a handshake.

‘Berynth Magistratum, I have you,’ the speakers on the desk warbled.

‘This is Stine at Stine and Stine. I have a—’

There was a click as the link disconnected.

‘Hello? Hello?’ Stine said.

+I’ve blocked his comm. Now, Patience, please walk out of there.+

Stine, of Stine and Stine, tried his wand again. When he looked around, the woman had gone.

SHE STORMED OUT of the hall’s reception chamber onto the iron-railed promenade. The hanging thimble lamps shone overhead with a feeble, pearly light. Instinctively, she allowed the stream of pedestrian traffic to swallow her up and carry her along. All around her were the rich and privileged of a double-dozen worlds, strolling along, some body-guarded, some carried in ornate litters, some sporting parasols or long trains.

+Sorry,+ she sent.+I fumbled that.+

+It doesn’t matter.+

+It does. It took me by surprise. His reaction. He was so... angry.+

+Proud, that’s all. We aimed a little too high, trying an Imperial jeweller. We can learn from this.+

She threaded through the crowd and headed down a flight of iron steps onto a lower stack. It was quieter there. She stopped and leaned on the guard rail, gazing down into the deep interstack drop and the street levels below. She got her breath.

+I'm off my game, Gideon.+

+You're not. You're fine.+

+I can tell when you don't mean it. I'm off my game.+

+Maybe you are, Patience. Would you like to talk about why?+

+I'm off my game because I can't stand this. I hate what we're being forced to do.+

+That's only reasonable. So do I.+

She sighed, let go of the guard rail, and started walking again.

+How are the others getting on?+

+Much like you. They're not getting anywhere. Although they're not quite as combative as you.+

+I said I was sorry, Gideon. What happened back there? The last few places I tried just got a bit cagey when the subject came up, but that... he was so venomous. As if I was a criminal.+

+As I said, I think we aimed too high. Stine and Stine is about as illustrious a hall as there is on Utochre. The man felt insulted. His hall was insulted. The inference hurt him. Put it behind you.+

+I think you should switch me out for Kara. Kara would do this better.+

+Put it behind you.+

She had walked to the far end of the stack level, into the gloomy architectural cleft where the armoured curve of the roof dome met the stack ends. There was a small and dingy dining house there, built into the eaves of the giant outer roof. It clearly catered for under staff and the utility personnel who worked menial jobs in the halls. The staff frowned and whispered at the sight of her fine, expensive clothes. She ignored them and sat down at a vacant table. Around her, household staffers, gig drivers and stack-gutters hunched over and murmured to one another.

'Mamzel?' asked a maid in an apron, coming over. 'There is a good place a level up where you might be more comfortable.'

'I'm comfortable here, thanks,' said Kys. 'A caffeine. Black, sweet, and an amasec, if you have it. Cooking will do.'

‘Yes, mamzel.’

Waiting for her order to arrive, she rose again and approached the heavy shield plate that formed the norm wall of the dining house. She touched the control stud, and the shield slid up. She looked out on the world outside through the thick glass. The blackened, fat bellied slopes of Berynth hive shelving away below, the ice beyond, under a broiling sky. The savage gales beat at the glass and bombarded it with ice crystals.+We are criminals now, aren’t we?’+

+Patience...+

+Oh, stop it. We are. I know it. Rogue.+

+It’s the only way we have left.+

+I hate it, Gideon, and I hate the idea that he’s still out there. I hadn’t realised before, but when you told me he was dead, it felt like a weight lifting off me.+

+I’m sorry. It felt that way to me too, if that’s any consolation.+

Kys put her hand against the glass and stared out at the nocturnal blizzard.

+However... Patience, we need to retain control. We can’t afford to be seen, and I think you were about to pin that Stine fellow to his chair by his scrotum.+

She smiled.+At the very least. I am so sorry. I’m finding this hard. So... how are the others doing?+

+Maud and Carl have covered five halls between them. Nothing. Harlon has managed to secure us an underboat. Now Carl is off buying rings down in the brash quarters.+

+Doesn’t he have enough rings?+

+I don’t know. I don’t pay attention to such things. Can one have enough rings?+

+Not if you’re Carl, apparently.’

The maid returned with the order. Kys went back to her table, drank the amasec in one and sipped her caffeine. It was too hot, and the amasec had

been rough. Cooking, definitely. She dropped a generous number of coins on the table and stood up.+What's next?+

+Can you handle another?+

+Yes. Of course.+

+Only when you're ready. Exit and head up a stack. Then along to your right. Corlos and Saquettar, Lapidary.+

Patience sighed.+How do I look?+

+Beautiful.+

+Then let's go.+

+Wait. Wait, Patience. Sit back down. Drink your caffeine. I believe Carl has found something.+

'What's your name?' Thonius asked.

'I am Lenec Yanvil, sir,' the man replied. He was small and potbellied, with nimble hands. He smelled of pitch and polishing amalgams.

'Well, Lenec Yanvil, if I was to, say, purchase that gorgeous lapis signet I wavered over, would you confide in me?'

'I'd be delighted to,' said Yanvil.

Thonius produced some more large denomination coins and counted them out onto the stall's stained baize cover. Yanvil picked up the signet ring, and carefully wrapped it in a small piece of felt.

'It's all about reward, you see,' he said quietly. 'Palms greasing palms. The halls have an arrangement with the House. They have had for centuries. Some will admit it, quietly, others deny it, but they all benefit.'

'How so?'

'Every single hall in Berynth pays a retainer to the House in return for coherent information about new seams, stone beds and metal deposits. The jewellery business here is what Berynth is famous for, but it's just a by-product of Berynth's heavy industry. The first halls to set up here in the old days made their profits from the spoil of the intensive ore mining, but no one these days is going to sustain a business on accidental finds. Neither do the halls have the financial resources to maintain comprehensive

mining operations of their own. So they pay to know where to look, and then hire out the mining complexes to do spot excavations. Everyone profits.'

'It sounds very companionable.'

Yanvil shrugged. 'The halls are very proprietorial about who gets access to the House. They vet. It's an exclusive service. But then, Throne knows, you have to be pretty exclusive to come all this way to go jewellery shopping.'

'How do they vet?'

'You need to find an agent. They're very exclusive too. They don't advertise. A client hooks up with an agent, the agent takes them to an appropriate hall and makes an introduction. Then the client has to make a purchase, something pricy. Horologs are good, I hear. The purchase price is the hall's fee. The client then gives the item to the agent as a gift. Later, the agent sells the item back to the hall for a cut of the fee. The item goes back in the hall's display, and the hall's made a tidy profit.'

'Very neat.'

'Palms are greased, backs are mutually scratched. Everyone smiles.'

'So, to find an agent...?'



TWO

‘INCOHERENT? WELL, THAT’S a different thing altogether.’

‘Oh? How so?’ asked Carl Thonius sweetly.

Down in the brash quarters, in the low hive, things were more basic. The stack-depths were cluttered with dirty stalls and tented stands of soiled canvas, selling knock-off and bad-cut gems, trinkets, keepsakes, totems and charms. The air was smoggy from the oil drum fires and stank of liquor and refuse. Bagpipes keened and drums beat. There were fire dancers, shucksters, lhofers, and the constant, shabby bustle of the hab classes and the migrant workers, washing aimlessly back and forth in the low hive like rank water in a bilge.

The stall holder glanced around to see if anyone was listening. He had one sunken eye, from years of using a stubby jeweller’s loupe.

‘Seeing as how you’ve bought so many rings from me, my friend, let me tell you. Coherence comes at a price. You have to be introduced, for a start.’

‘You do?’

‘Have yourself an introduction. The halls expect that.’

‘Can you provide such a service?’

The stall holder laughed a phlegmy laugh. ‘Mercy, no!’ He gestured around at his modest stall. ‘I’m brash, born and bred. I don’t move in those kind of circles.’

‘But you know the system?’

He nodded.

‘Well, I might know something.’

‘Palms are greased and backs are mutually scratched, eh?’ said Thonius. ‘That gold thumb ring there...’

‘SO STINE KNEW all about it?’ asked Patience.

‘According to my source, they all do,’ said Carl. ‘They just don’t like to talk about it.’

‘That little shit. He made me feel this big, and—’

‘Because you weren’t introduced,’ said Carl quietly. He was sitting on a couch in the bay window of the chamber, admiring the new rings on his hand. The winter night ticked and rattled at the window panes behind him.

‘I’ve half a mind to go back there and shove a kineblade up his arse,’ Kys growled.

‘Half a mind is all you’ll need for that,’ said Ballack, overhearing her as he walked in from the adjoining room. ‘We have to be careful.’

Kys turned slowly and glared at the interrogator. In the two months he’d been with them, he’d shown an unfailing ability to wind her up.

She felt sorry for him, of course. Ballack had been through an ordeal, and he’d lost the hand, after all. He’d also shown creditable initiative bringing the whole matter to Ravenor. Still, he was, as Kara might say, a smug little ninker when all was said and done, and far too pretty for his own good, with that long white hair and those ion-drive blue eyes.

For once, he seemed to notice her displeasure. ‘Sorry, Kys,’ he said. ‘That was rude of me. It’s just... sometimes I’m very aware that I’m risking my entire career doing this. No offence, sir.’

‘None taken,’ Ravenor replied, his voice issuing as an electronic monotone from his chair. ‘We’re all risking our careers.’

No one spoke for a moment. The fire crackled in the grate and warmed the room, part of a rented suite in Berynth high-hive. The floor was a checkerboard of brown and cream wooden tiles, the walls panelled in dark umwood. The fireplace was an extraordinary frame porcelain inlaid with silver and nacrous shell. The logs spat and coughed. Kys, Ballack and Thonius reflected quietly on their situation, each in their own way. Patience wondered what depth of worry knotted in Ravenor’s mind.

+I realised why Stine’s reaction upset me so,+ she sent.

+Go on.+

+It wasn't that he made me feel like a criminal. It was that I *am* a criminal and he forced me to realise what that means. Everything I've ever done in your service, Gideon, I've done in the knowledge that I'm serving the Emperor's ultimate will, but there's no legitimacy any more.+

+There will be. I will make the ordos understand why I've had to take this course. We will have our sanction.+

+But there isn't any right now.+

The chair swung around from the fireplace and faced the three of them. They all looked up respectfully. 'I've said it before, but for the record, let me repeat... when we're done, I will bring us to Myzard. To Rorken, if necessary. I will make account, and I will take the reprimand.'

'I wonder who they'll send after us?' Carl mused, admiring his rings again. He looked up at Ravenor. 'I mean, they're bound to send someone, right?'

Ballack sat down on a tub chair. 'Lilith. Myzard will send Lilith and a team. Lilith Abfequarn is good. She already has a black notation rating. We can only hope she doesn't have the first clue where to start looking. That means, we can't make a scene.' He looked pointedly at Kys.

'Fair point. It's been made already. No one needs to tell me again,' Patience replied. 'So, Carl? Where do we find this agent?'

Thonius was about to reply when the apartment's outer hatch slid open. Patience saw how quickly – how nervously – Ballack rose and placed his good hand on the grip of his pistol.

It was Maud Plyton. A version of Maud Plyton, at least. She looked strange, buttoned into a long gown of Parsiji lace and deep green silk. The material strained and bulged voluptuously. Her cropped hair and heavy make-up created the unfortunate suggestion of a man in drag. 'Nice to see you too,' she sneered at Ballack, seeing his hand on his gun. 'Not had a good day, Maud?' asked Kys.

Maud flopped down heavily on the nearest couch and yanked off her high, feminine shoes. She'd borrowed them from Kara and they didn't fit well.

Her feet were sore. ‘Bastard things!’ she declared as she tossed them over the back of the couch. ‘I’m sorry to say,’ she said, ‘I got nothing.’ ‘It’s all right, Maud,’ Ravenor replied, ‘we have a lead now.’

‘Oh, good.’ Plyton replied, getting up. In one, ungainly upward drag, she wrenched her expensive dress off over her head. The dress was another lend from Kara, tight and too short for Maud Playton’s frame. She wriggled the dress off her arms, and headed out of the room in her support hose and whalebone corsetry. There was a considerable sense of pneumatic tension. ‘Thank Throne that’s off! It was throttling me. I don’t do posh.’ ‘You do it very well.’ said Ravenor.

Plyton grunted dismissively from the next room and called out, ‘I do undercover all right, but that was not a bit of me. I haven’t had that many unfamiliar hands in my chest area since I was last assigned to vice.’

‘Well, fancy,’ said Carl.

Plyton stuck her head back around the door, and then lifted one arm and sniffed her armpit. ‘And I stink. That’s not high-class, is it?’

‘I can’t begin to tell you,’ Carl said.

‘Is there a drink going?’ Maud asked.

‘I’ll get you one,’ said Ballack.

‘Help me unlace this bastard corsetry someone. I beg you. Preferably you, Patience, seeing as it’s yours.’

Smiling, Kys walked across the room and followed Plyton into the adjoining chamber. Plyton leaned forward and Kys started to untie the laces. It was a struggle.

‘Emperor help me, I can’t breathe. How do you wear this stuff, Kys?’

‘Well,’ said Patience smoothly.

‘Here’s that drink,’ said Ballack, appearing in the doorway with a glass. He hovered.

‘Here. In my hand!’ Plyton said. ‘I can’t reach it when you’re standing over there.’

‘I was just... mindful of your...’

‘I’m sure I haven’t got anything you haven’t seen before,’ Plyton said.

‘No, just a little more of it.’

‘Oh, you wish!’ mocked Plyton, taking the drink and sipping. ‘Yum, lovely.’

‘If anyone gets to go back to Stine and Stine,’ Kys called out, tugging at the corset laces, ‘it’s going to be me.’

‘I was hoping to participate myself,’ said Ballack. He had returned to the fireside in the neighbouring room, and was trying to secure his long white hair into a pony tail. It was a hard feat to accomplish with just one hand. Evisorex had severed his left hand cleanly, and his wrist stump was sealed in a black leather nub packed with micro healing systems. It would be another month at least before it was ready for an augmetic graft. ‘I really would like to serve, sir,’ he said. ‘I want to be useful.’

‘The pair of you, then,’ said Ravenor. ‘If that’s all right with you, Carl?’

Thonius shrugged. ‘I’m happy.’ He rose to his feet. ‘Can I help you with that, Gall?’

‘Thank you.’ Ballack replied. Carl began to comb Ballack’s mane with his fingers to tie it up.

‘We’ll wait for the others to return,’ said Ravenor. ‘You can get started in the morning.’

‘So what’s keeping Nayl?’ grimaced Plyton as Kys slowly released her torso from its confinement.



THREE

SLEET WHIPPED AGAINST the windowpanes of the ground level hangar. The work crews had gone for the day, and the underboats sat in their ice pool like grey sea beasts, sleeping. Only a few spotlights shone down from the iron gantries.

Angharad made a soft noise like a sigh and rolled off him. They lay together in the dark for a while listening to the patter of sleet.

‘I’m glad you lived,’ Nayl said.

‘That’s a funny thing to say,’ she replied, turning her shoulder against his chest.

‘Is it?’

‘Obvious then. You didn’t need to say it. I felt how glad you were.

Right then.’

‘We should get back.’ said Nayl.

‘Is that thing really necessary?’ she asked, nodding to the little psyk-block unit beside them.

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s hard to explain. Ravenor... I don’t want to hurt him.’

‘Hurt him?’

‘You’re so like Arianhrod.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Forget it. Trust me. I’ve come to know how hard it must be for Gideon to be the way he is. He’s human, after all.’

‘He has his mind.’

‘Yes, but he has his memories. It’s just a feeling I get.’

‘That he wouldn’t approve?’

‘Maybe. It’d be like rubbing his face in it. If he had a face.’

It was warm and dark under the vent panels. They’d made a bed of cold weather furs from a locker.

‘We should go,’ she said. She rose in one fluid motion, and began to look for her clothes. She was silhouetted against the bay’s lamplight for a moment.

He looked at her. ‘Maybe another five minutes won’t hurt,’ he said.



FOUR

WAITING MADE KARA Swole tense, and tension gave her a headache. At least, she hoped it was the tension. She didn't want to think about the other possibility.

She was alone on the *Arethusa's* main bridge, nominally on watch, although there was little to watch for. Most of the ship's systems were shut down and de-powered: just enough juice running through the conduits to maintain basics. As soon as they had arrived at high anchor above Utochre, Unwerth had turned off the commercial transponder and deactivated the ship's carrier number and beacon. They had no wish to advertise their location, let alone their identity. Every three hours, automated systems lit up the *Arethusa's* vox-grid and allowed her to check in with the surface team. The silences in between were numbing. Naturally, if any problems developed, Ravenor could always summon them without waiting for the routine vox-check. Kara had made sure a lander was ready in the belly hold.

She checked her chron. Another forty-five minutes before the next check in. She was fidgety. She'd tried a workout to shake it off, a little blade practice, but it hadn't done the trick. She'd felt rusty, slow, her heart not in it. It had been a long time since they'd seen any combat. She had no lust for combat, but the discipline kept her sharp.

The worst of it was, her mind was cloudy. She felt befuddled, and she wasn't sure why. She remembered Ravenor remarking on it back on Tancred, just before they'd left, some comment about him sensing something on her mind. She could remember getting a little steamed about that, but couldn't recall why. Guilt, probably. She'd never told Ravenor about her illness, nor of its miraculous remission. She hated keeping secrets, especially from him.

The cloudiness had been on her since then. Maybe that's what he had detected. Maybe that's why he'd asked her to lead the second team and stay aboard the ship as back-up. Perhaps he didn't feel she could cut it as a principal agent any more. Perhaps he was right, but she hated the feeling that she was being sidelined.

She hated it almost as much as she hated the cloudiness. It was a nagging sensation, like the haunting awareness of a memory that temporarily refused to form. There was something on the tip of her tongue that just wouldn't realise itself.

Of course, forgetfulness was one of the primary symptoms to watch for.

She realised she was rubbing her temple with her fingers. She pulled her hand away.

She got up quickly and walked off the bridge, down the echoing spinal corridor of the ship. Most of the *Arethusa's* twenty-strong crew were sleeping, apart from a few running spot repairs in the enginarium. The old, wretched hulk creaked and groaned around her. The walls were scabby and decayed. Unwerth's vessel was neither a beautiful nor a reliable machine.

She heard Belknap's voice, picked up her pace, and then slowed again, realising he was in conversation. Through an open hatch, she spied him, sitting in the forward communal on the other side of a table from Sholto Unwerth. They were chatting and drinking glasses of dry Thracian muskell. Belknap got on with Unwerth better than most of them, with the exception of Kys, who had bonded with the little shipmaster during the perilous hours in Petropolis, and now deflected the worst of the teasing the likes of Carl and Nayl dished out at Unwerth's expense.

Belknap got on with everybody, of course, because medics usually possessed that reassuring knack. But Belknap and Unwerth were both outsiders, part of Ravenor's team only because of the support services of conveyance and healing they provided. Though both had faced serious danger on Eustis Majoris, neither was employed as a fighter or principal agent.

Unwerth had suffered badly. He had been tortured and mutilated at the whim of the infamous bounty hunter, Lucius Worna, before Kys had rescued him, but he had held out, loyal to them all. One look at his hands showed the pain he had endured for them, and yet the likes of Carl still delighted in teasing and mocking—

Carl. His name stung in her head as she thought of him. She frowned at the inexplicable strength of her own reaction. What had Carl ever done to her, except be an odious twit?

She backed away. Unwerth was telling Belknap some long and involved story about his own family history.

‘...it is much derailed, in places high and low,’ she heard the shipmaster saying, ‘that there ever was a race of beings of the name the squats, and many scholams and those of the high mindful claim it’s just a myth, a thing that never was, but my direst old grand avuncular swore to me that the Unwerth lineament has some timbre of that blood in it, right back in all perspective, I mean...’

Kara had no wish to intrude. More properly, she wanted to speak to Belknap alone. She backed silently away.

‘Kara?’ Belknap called, looking around from the table. Eyes in the back of his head, that one. The old vigilance of an Imperial Guardsman on sentry duty.

‘Just walking around,’ she shrugged.

‘Join us,’ Belknap said.

‘Have a sniff of this here numbskull,’ Unwerth smiled, jiggling the bottle. ‘We are just of mindless confabuling.’

‘In a while, maybe. I’ve got to be on hand when the grid wakes up.’

She walked away, following a side corridor down to the ship’s infirmary. She turned on the lamps and began to search the scrubbed steel cupboards for a pain killer. Her head was really thumping.

It couldn’t be back. It couldn’t be back, could it? Please, Throne—

She stopped searching, aware that she was starting to hyperventilate. Panic, that wasn’t like her. She leaned on the side counter, breathing deep

and slow. Nearby, packed into its carrying modules, was the expensive medical equipment Ravenor had purchased on Eustis Majoris. Belknap had used it to diagnose her condition and monitor it. He still checked her once every fortnight or so. She remembered the last occasion, en route from Tancred. She remembered his delight at the improbability of her health. The same every time. His joy.

How could she tell him? How could she ask?

‘Are you all right?’

Kara switched around Wystan Frauka stood in the doorway.

‘Sorry. You startled me,’ she said.

Frauka shrugged. ‘I saw the light on in here. Are you all right?’

‘Bit of a headache,’ she admitted.

Frauka dropped his half-smoked lho-stick onto the corridor deck, ground it out with his heel, and entered the infirmary. He opened a glass fronted cabinet and fished out a vial of capsules. ‘I find these work pretty nicely,’ he said.

‘They’re pain killers?’

He frowned, as if the question had never occurred to him. ‘I suppose. The blue ones there are a lot stronger, but they give you funny dreams and a dry thirst. These are what you might call headache strength.’

‘I didn’t know you suffered from headaches,’ she said, taking the vial from his hand.

‘Well,’ he began.

‘Suffering from headaches is something I would be sympathetic to,’ she said. ‘As opposed to, say, random, secret experimentation with the infirmary’s pharm supply.’

Frauka nodded sagely. ‘Then we’ll call it headaches,’ he said, ‘and say no more about it. I was just trying to help.’ He stepped towards the door.

‘Sorry,’ she called. ‘Sorry. Forgive me. I’ve got a real tension headache. Your life is quite boring, isn’t it, Wystan?’

The blunter shrugged. 'It has its moments. They're usually brief and quite violent. The rest of the time... well, thanks for noticing.'

Kara poured a glass of water from the scrub sink and rolled some of the capsules into her palm. 'Two?'

'I usually take three or four,' he said. He patted his thick chest sadly. 'But then again, I've got more body mass than you, and usually very little to get up for in the morning.'

She laughed, and knocked down two of the pills.

'How's the boy?' she asked.

'Why don't you come and see?'

He led her down the short linking companionway to the small wardroom adjoining the infirmary and surgical chambers. Only one of the six cots was occupied. Zael lay, pale and thin, in his endless sleep, attached to a feeder and bio-monitor. Beside his cot, there was a single chair, and a cabinet on which sat a lamp, a data-slate, and a bowl full of lho-stick butts. 'Any change?' she whispered.

'Yeah. He woke up and started dancing. I forgot to tell you.' 'Shut up,' she scolded with a grin.

'I won't half miss him when he wakes up,' Frauka said with a sadness that surprised her. 'Who's going to listen to my stories then?' 'Can I get you anything?' she asked. Frauka shook his head. 'Well, good night, and thanks.'

She left. Frauka wandered over to the chair and sat down. He lit a lho-stick and picked up the data-slate, thumbing it live. The glow of the screen reflected on his face.

'Where was I?' he said. 'Ah, yes... "Her nipples were hard and pink with excitement. She squealed in delight as his loincloth dropped to the deck. Very slowly, he—" ' *Your nose is bleeding.* 'What?'

Your nose is bleeding.

'Dammit!' Frauka said, moustaching his left index finger across his upper lip to staunch the flow. He put down the data-slate, slid the burning lho-stick into the dish, and pulled out a handkerchief. He swabbed his

nose, and peered at the smeared linen. It wasn't the first time it had been spotted with blood. The old spots looked like rust. 'Not much. It's stopped.' *But your nose was bleeding.*

'Yes. So what?' He tucked the handkerchief away again, sniffing. *Why?*

'Why?' Frauka drew on his lho stick. 'Why? You ask why?' *I'm waiting for the answer.* 'Because it was. Shut up.' *Noses bleed for a reason.*

'I'm sure they do. In my case, sonny, it's because I picked it.' *Both nostrils?*

'Do me a favour. Shut up. I was reading.' I'm bored with the endless dirty stories.

'Well, hey, I'm not.' Frauka snapped. He raised the slate again. '“Her full breasts were as white and round as—”' He lowered the slate and gazed at the boy. 'You know what I have to do if you wake up?'

Yeah. I can feel the weight of the gun in your pocket and the weight of the promise you made to the Chair in your head.

'Well, then.'

There was a long pause.

Then Wystan said. 'I'm an untouchable. There shouldn't be any way you can feel anything in my head.'

And yet?

'Shut up. Where was I?'

Something about breasts?

'Right. Yes.'

You can't trust any of them any more. You know that? So many dirty stories. So many secrets. Kara, Thonius, Ballack, Nayl...

'So I won't tell anyone. Will you?'

The boy on the cot lay as still as death.

'Right, where was I?'

SHE WAS MAKING her way up the spinal corridor to the bridge when Belknap appeared.

‘Hi,’ she said.

‘Still just walking around?’ he asked.

She nodded.

‘Sholto’s asleep. Too much numbskull. He’s got some great stories. You know, he believes his family is descended from—’

‘I’m scared,’ she said abruptly.

He looked at her. He didn’t need her to tell him why.

‘Come with me to the infirmary.’

‘I can’t. I have to get to the bridge. The grid’s going to wake in five minutes.’

‘All right. Be calm. Check the grid. I’ll go and set up, and then come and get you.’

She nodded again.

‘Everything will be fine,’ he said. He took hold of her hands and folded them into the sign of the aquila across her breasts. ‘Have faith.’

He kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck as if she was going to break it.

‘Ten minutes,’ he said, pulling away.

She walked in the opposite direction.

Fyflank was on the bridge, running some impenetrable system checks on the main helm. The manhound looked up and grunted when she appeared, and then carried on with its work.

Kara sat down at the vox station. She rubbed her eyes with both palms and drew a deep breath.

The board lit up. Systems woke on automatic. Runes glowed, and then scrolled across the main comm screen. She waited for the graphics to settle down, and then keyed in the carrier signal.

Nest wishes Talon, she typed. Above and starward, the voices of friends.

A pause. Then letters typed out across the screen.

Too tired for Glossia, Kara. Everything’s all right here. We have a lead, a possible in. How are things up there?

Everything's fine, she typed.

Good. Talk to you again in three hours. Goodnight, Kara.

Goodnight, Gideon.



FIVE

BERYNTH IS A dark, dirty, ugly hive clamped to the south-western tip of Utochre's second main landmass, ringed by fifty smoke-belching mine stations. This mass of industry and habitation, over ten thousand kilometres in area, cannot be seen from orbit. It cannot be seen by the *Arethusia*. This is due to Utochre's miasmal cloud cover. Most of the moon, land and oceans both, is ice-clad, and the atmosphere a dense, opaque cloud mass, thanks to an impact winter that has lasted thirty thousand years. Astronomers blame the foul climactic circumstances on a past collision with a lesser moon.

I sift and consider such facts, to keep my mind turning.

A moon itself, the eighth moon of twenty-eight, Utochre circles the well populated Imperial world of Cyto at a great distance. Notably a claw-shaped new moon in Cyto's winter skies, Utochre has a reputation as a dark place. The early settlers on Cyto had invested Utochre with myths, suggesting it was a repository of evil, a place to which bad or twisted souls migrated after death.

Perhaps it is a repository of evil. Certainly, it has become a famous place. Nobility, and the wealthy, make pilgrimage to Utochre, usually on charter passage from the main planet. The ferries are regular. Fecund with minerals, metals and precious stones, thanks to its complex and active structure, Utochre has become, over the years, a place of intensive ore mining and, secondarily, a centre for lapidary craft. The rock seams under the moon's ice regularly yield the best uncut gems in the sector. All the key Imperial jewellers, and many hundreds of lesser halls, have set up premises at Berynth, exploiting this resource. The sector's nobility come here to indulge themselves, partly because of Utochre's resources, and

partly because it is exclusive. Only the very rich and the most nobly born can afford the prices, and the effort, of the ferry connection.

But there is another service that Cyto's twenty-eighth moon offers, for those who are very wealthy, or very superstitious.

Or very desperate.

I have a bad feeling that I fall into the last category.

IT IS A risk. The Wych House was always going to be a risk. There have been so many attempts to find it and close it down over the years. It is elusive. It is well protected. It is dangerous. It is never wrong.

Going to the Wych House had been Carl's idea. I had blocked the notion to begin with, until Ballack weighed in with his support for it. I like Ballack, I admire him. Perhaps that's why I finally demurred and brought us to Utochre.

From the moment we left Tancred high anchor, we were rogue. Not Special Condition, *rogue*. The word has a specific definition in the Inquisition's rubric. It denotes an agent or agents who are deemed negligent, insubordinate and criminal. I have broken direct orders from my superiors. I have turned my back on an assigned duty. I have taken a mission upon myself without leave or permission. I have hidden myself so that I cannot be rebuked or stopped. *Rogue*.

I never thought, never imagined myself in commission of such a sin, but this was my deliberate choice.

On Tancred, on the very hour of our departure, Ballack and Angharad had come to find us in secret. This was in the immediate aftermath of Molotch's bloody trap. Ballack had come forward and offered his intelligence to me. He had not dared to go to Myzard.

I had scanned the interrogator carefully, several times, with and without Ballack's consent. The story was consistent every time: closing on Molotch with Fenx, being trapped and picked off, one by one. Molotch jeering as he left Ballack to his doom, cuffed to a turbine hub. Angharad

arriving just in time to cut Ballack free with her steel and haul him to safety.

‘Molotch is alive,’ Ballack had told me plainly. ‘He staged it all so he could disappear behind a faked corpse. You were right, sir, Molotch was here on Tancred, and now he’s alive and free. The Inquisition believes he’s dead. We were betrayed. Someone in the ordos betrayed us. That’s the only way Molotch could have known.’

‘And you come to me because?’

‘Because, sir, you were right, and you’re the only one I trust.’ Molotch had escaped me too many times. Molotch had cost me too many times. Majeskus. Oh Throne, dear Will and Norah and Eleena. The memory of their screams wakes me still.

Too many times, Zygmunt Molotch, but not any more. Even if it costs me my reputation and my career.

Someone inside the ordos betrayed Fenx to Molotch. Thus, the simple equation: the ordos cannot be trusted. To finish Molotch, I have to operate without their support or knowledge. I have to move in secret, and find Molotch before I am found.

It was always going to come down to this. Molotch is my nemesis. He was always going to be the one to destroy me.

Kara has just signed off. The vox-grid is dead again. She says everything is all right aboard the *Arethusa*, and I trust her, although I am still bothered by the mysterious secret she keeps. I stay awake and I think. I listen to the constant ticking of my obsession. Am I breaking all the rules I swore I’d never break, in order to do mankind a great service, a great service that only I am in a position to accomplish? Or am I just breaking all the rules? Either way, I fear I have led my friends into hell. I have doomed them all.

The Inquisition is not forgiving.

Kys, Maud and Carl are asleep. They are tired. I let them rest. Nayl is somewhere, screwing the Carthaen. He thinks I don’t know. I’m happy for

him and for her, and I want to kill them both. Throne, I haven't felt this way for a long time.

Not since the day I ended up in this box. It's quite enervating.

Bastard. That you're screwing her I don't mind. That you're hiding it from me, that I most certainly do. Did you think you were sparing my feelings? Did you? *Did you?*



SIX

THE SPOIL WELLS lay deep under the hive, deep in the subterranean foundations below the permafrost. They were dank, badly lit rockcrete vaults dozens of kilometres long where the slurry from the mining operations was dumped on a regular basis. The air smelled of stone dust and moisture and raw minerals. A biting cold wind seeped in from the surface, invading through loading slips and drop shafts, and gusted around the numbered silos raising a grey dust.

‘Hiram Lucic?’ Ballack called out.

The man halfway up the spoil slope rose and looked down at them. He was skinny, but bulked up by furs and thermal body lagging, topped off by parts of an old hostile environment suit. He was holding a hand scanner unit. Five rusty old prospector-servitors sorted and scrabbled around him on the heap, tossing lumps of black rock into their battered panniers with corroded skeletal forelimbs.

‘Who wants to know?’

‘We do.’

A male and a female stood at the base of the heap. They stared up at him.

‘Yes, I’m Lucic. But I’m also busy. I’ve paid through the nose for two hours’ free sweep of this mass, and I won’t waste a minute of that. “We” can go away and come back later. Or just go away.’

‘I think you’ll want to speak with us,’ the woman said. ‘We were told to ask for you. We need an introduction.’

Lucic paused, and glanced at the scanner in his hands. Pretty much nothing was showing. The spoil coming out of Deep Nineteen was poor these days. That probably explained why he’d got the free sweep at a knock down.

He sighed and slithered down the loose rock waste towards them. He moved with the expert tread of someone used to moving about on broken spill.

‘Go on, then,’ he said. Close up, they didn’t give much away, except that they were clean and well dressed, which suggested money.

‘An introduction at Stine and Stine,’ Kys said. Lucic was an odd fish, thin and lean, just sinew and bone under his cold gear. His face was all cheekbones and jaw corners and a long blade nose. He had large eyes, which seemed to bulge from meagre sockets.

‘An introduction? That’s an expensive undertaking.’

‘We understand that,’ Ballack said.

‘I know Stine and Stine,’ Lucic said, ‘in my capacity as a prospector. They buy my stuff sometimes. Let’s see, an introduction.’ He did a little maths in his head, gauging them by their manner and their clothes. Too little and he diddled himself. Too much, and he’d lose the job. He assayed the circumstances. He was good at assaying things.

‘Gonna be two or three, minimum,’ he said.

‘Hundred?’ asked Kys.

‘Hundred thousand,’ Ballack corrected. ‘I am right?’ Ballack asked.

Lucic nodded. ‘What you want is costly.’

‘What we want is an introduction,’ said Kys.

‘Let me get cleaned up,’ he said.

HE RE-JOINED THEM in a dirty public canteen where the spoil well workers and prospectors met and rested. He had changed into a grey bodyglove and a fur-lined coat. There was still dirt on his hands. Ballack bought three hot drinks and some wizened pastries from the stall. There was steam in the air, and the rank scent of over-worked heating units.

Lucic sat down with them at a battered metal table, lit a lho-stick in his nimble fingers, and put an old data-slate on the table top. Miners in bulky work suits shuffled past.

‘I’ll need names, details,’ Lucic said. ‘This isn’t something you can just walk into.’

‘So we’ve found,’ said Kys.

‘You don’t look like the normal sort,’ Lucic said.

‘And what’s that?’

‘Nobility. The kind with nothing better to do.’

‘What do we look like?’

Lucic stuck his tongue in his lean cheek so it bulged. He thought about it. ‘Trouble?’ he suggested. ‘Look, the halls don’t like to be mucked about. They have real pull here. Magistratum, Arbites... hell, even the Inquisition. That’s a no-no. Especially the Inquisition.’

‘I understand,’ said Ballack.

‘What would happen if that was the case?’ Kys asked.

‘You’d get dead, and me along with you.’

‘Wouldn’t that cause a problem? I mean,’ said Ballack, ‘if we were Inquisition, let’s say?’

‘Here? No, not really. Easy to hide a corpse or three here. The spoil smelters. The pack ice. The undersea. Easy to get lost.’

‘Well, we’re not Inquisition,’ said Ballack, ‘or Magistratum or anything like that. But you’ve spotted we’re not your regular type of clients, so we’d better come clean.’

‘Go on.’

‘We’re operatives working for a certain important individual. He has business interests in this sub, and he wants an inside track to guide his investments. There’s a lot at stake.’

‘And he trusts the House to provide that guidance?’

‘Shouldn’t he?’

‘Oh, the House is good. Investments, eh?’

Ballack handed Lucic a data crystal. The prospector loaded it into his slate.

‘My name is Gaul,’ said Ballack. ‘My associate here is called Kine.’

There was a pause while the slate hummed. ‘Linking to the hive substrate,’ said Lucic. ‘Just be a second. Gaul, Kine. There we go. From Eustis. Your biowork checks out.’

It ought to, thought Kys, the work Carl put in.

‘I think we can do business,’ said the prospector.

‘WELL?’ KARA ASKED slowly.

‘Everything’s good. There’s no sign of any regrowth,’ Belknap began to pack the medical kit away, carefully folding up the more delicate parts of the scanner.

He looked at her. She smiled. They embraced.

‘I was so scared!’ she sighed.

‘So was I. When you came to me like that. Kara, my love, I don’t want to scare you or jinx this, but you know you should—’

‘What? Be dead?’

‘You should be dead. The woman I met and fell in love with on Eustis Majoris had barely six months. Then, overnight, just like that, the cancer went. I kept thinking I’d made a mistake, that I’d missed something or it would come back. And when you came to me tonight... But, unless I’m very bad at my job, it hasn’t. It isn’t there. No sign. You’re clear.’

She got up. They were alone in the ship’s infirmary, apart from Frauka and the comatose boy in the ward nearby. Unwerth and Fyflank were up on the bridge.

‘Are you?’ Kara asked.

‘Am I what?’

‘Very bad at your job?’

He laughed. ‘No.’

She kissed his neck. Then she sat back.

‘What’s that look?’ he asked, reclasping his kit and carrying it to a wall locker.

‘I never told Ravenor. I kept it a secret. Now it’s gone, but that secret inside me still remains.’

‘What do you mean?’

Kara shrugged. ‘I hated keeping it from him. I trained myself to cover the truth. Now there’s no truth to cover, it still feels like I’m covering for something.’

‘You’ve lost me,’ he said.

She steepled her hands in front of her mouth thoughtfully and breathed out. ‘It’s hard to explain. I feel like I’m keeping a terrible secret, but there’s no secret left to keep.’

‘The mind becomes conditioned.’ Belknap said. ‘It gets used to what it gets used to. It’ll pass.’

‘I hope so. I wake up sometimes and feel I can almost catch what it is.’

‘The secret?’

‘Yes, the secret. It has something to do with Carl.’

‘Carl?’

Kara sniggered. ‘I know. It’s stupid, but why do I feel like I’m lying on Carl’s behalf all the time?’

‘Guilt,’ he said. ‘Just your sense of guilt towards Ravenor. Throne knows why that has attached itself to Carl. Do you know something about him that I don’t?’

‘He’s a pompous arse, he wears too many rings, and he’s very good at his job.’

‘So, no then?’

She shrugged. ‘So why am I so muzzy? So clouded? Why have I got, doctor, this pressing sense of unease. This forgetfulness?’

‘Lack of exercise,’ he replied.

‘Right.’

He paused, and looked around at her. She knew that look. ‘We’re alone, you know?’

‘Frauka’s in the next room.’

‘Oh, what does porn-boy care?’

He kissed her, dragged off her vest, and cupped her breasts with his hands. She pulled him down onto the infirmary couch.

‘Exercise, you reckon?’ she murmured.

‘HAVE YOU EVER wondered just how much you can get away with before someone notices?’ Thonius asked.

‘That’s a curious question to ask.’ Ravenor replied.

They had gone up onto observation bay high in Berynth Hive to pass the time while they waited for Ballack and Kys. With the dome shutters up, there was a considerable view of the icebound landscape and the belting, eternal storm.

There was no one else around apart from a courting couple, low habbers, at the far end of the rail. The place was like a temple to the elements.

Thonius sat down on a metal bench beside Ravenor’s chair.

‘Have you, though?’ Carl asked.

‘Have you what?’ Maud Plyton asked as she joined them, carrying two metal cups of hot secum she’d bought at a stall in the hallway outside the bay. She handed one to Carl and then sat down on the other end of the bench.

‘Thanks.’ Carl said.

‘I’m intrigued.’ said Maud, sipping her drink.

‘Carl just asked me if I’d ever wondered just how much I could get away with before someone noticed,’ Ravenor said.

‘That’s a curious question to ask,’ Plyton said.

‘That was my response,’ Ravenor agreed.

‘No, look,’ said Carl. ‘We’ve gone rogue. I understand why we had to, and I support the decision. That’s well and good. I just wondered how much you would risk? I mean, how much you would do in plain sight of others before you thought they would notice?’

‘Myzard’s people will be looking for any hint of our activity. So, very little is my answer.’

‘It fascinates me,’ Carl said, getting up. ‘Subterfuge fascinates me. What a person can get away with, I mean.’

‘You’d be surprised what a person can get away with,’ Maud Plyton said, ‘in my professional experience.’ Ravenor’s voxsponder made a sound that indicated he was chuckling.

‘Oh, I think I wouldn’t,’ said Carl. He put his cup down. ‘Our work, sir, it’s all about secrets, isn’t it? Keeping secrets, opening secrets up. Molotch, forgive me for mentioning his name, is so damn dangerous because of his ability to keep secrets.’

‘Does a point come with that, Thonius?’ asked Plyton.

‘I think so, Maud,’ Carl replied. He looked out at the storm. ‘It’s not just keeping a secret, is it? It’s about how you use it. What latitude you have.’

‘“Latitude”?’ asked Ravenor.

‘Yes, sir. What you say and what you don’t say. It’s not just about keeping the secret locked in. It’s about having the strength and confidence to reveal your secret when you know it won’t matter.’

‘That’s an interesting notion,’ Ravenor said. ‘Develop it, Carl.’

Carl laughed. ‘We’re in class now, are we?’

‘We’re in class till I say we’re not, Carl Thonius,’ Ravenor replied.

‘Fair point,’ said Carl, although his face darkened. ‘For a start, they say that liars have the best memories.’

‘Old school lore,’ said Plyton. ‘First day on the job at interrogation, I learned that. Fakers need good memories to remember what they’ve faked. You need a first-class memory to hold a false story together under inspection.’

‘Sound Magistratum advice,’ Ravenor remarked.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Carl, ‘but a liar... a real liar... needs to vent himself sometimes, just to stay sane. He needs to confide, or act openly when he’s

sure no one will notice. He needs to be able to get away with telling the truth once in a while. Just to test the integrity of his deception.'

'You think Molotch might be so driven?' asked Ravenor.

'He might. It's worth considering.'

'So noted,' Ravenor said. 'That's good, clean thinking, Carl.'

Carl smiled. 'Thank you, sir. I mean to say, what if a person did this, right in front of you?'

He waved his right hand. Plyton set her cup down and drew her sidearm out of her jacket. She cocked it and set the muzzle against the side of her head.

'I think you're fretting, Carl.' Ravenor said. 'The tension's getting to you.'

'Or this?' Carl said, grinning. He waved his hand again. His hand was beginning to glow with a dull, red light.

At the far end of the platform, the courting couple was kissing. The man suddenly jerked away from his girl and floated backwards in the air towards the dome windows. She yelped, disbelieving, and stared at him. He was trying to cry out. His arms were flailing. He floated backwards, and hit the glass gently, like a balloon.

Then he went through the glass, like a hand through water.

Outside, hanging there, he screamed. No one could hear him, although his lover squealed at the sight. The sleet storm shredded his clothes and slammed him against the glass.

The constant barrage of the ice particles, like blades, shredded the meat off him in about thirty seconds. His skeleton, with gory strands of flesh and clothing still attached, with wounded organs still throbbing inside his ribcage, slowly slid down the glass leaving a red smear, and dropped away onto the blackness.

'I mean,' said Carl. 'What about that?'

'The storm is quite magnificent, don't you think?' Ravenor said. 'The primal quality of it.'

‘You didn’t see, did you?’ Carl murmured. ‘I did that, and you didn’t see. Well, that’s something.’

He looked at Maud Plyton. ‘Not today,’ he said.

She made her weapon safe and put it away. Then she picked up her cup and sipped again.

Carl lowered his hand. It had stopped glowing.

‘That’s good. Very good.’

Plyton looked up. ‘Sir? Why is that woman down there screaming?’ she asked.

LUCIC WALKED INTO the hall, past the sensors and the waiting servitors. He tracked muddy footprints across the worn bronze flooring.

‘Get out. We’re closed,’ said Stine from behind the desk.

‘I’ve got an introduction to make,’ Lucic said. He sat down on one of the leather couches.

‘Really?’ Stine sneered across the desk.

Yes, really. You’d better stay sharp.’

‘Is it remunerative? Or is it like the last few losers you’ve brought in, Lucic? Stine and Stine is getting tired of your time wasting.’

‘Neither. The Inquisition is onto us. Get ready.’

Stine looked up sharply, suddenly interested. ‘The Inquisition? How do you know?’

‘I was paid to know.’ said Hiram Lucic.



SEVEN

STINE WAITED BY his wooden desk in the hall's main chamber of display. He was nervous, his palms sweating. He began to pace.

He stopped suddenly at the chime of a vox-link in the shadows nearby. There was a brief crackle of muted transmission, and then a voice said, 'Understood.'

The red-haired man who had been standing in the shadows stepped into one of the pools of emerald light containing the chamber's showcases. He was slipping a link back into his pocket.

'That was Lucic,' the man said. 'They're on their way. Five minutes.'

'I don't like this at all,' said Stine.

'You'll like the alternative even less,' said the red-haired man. Stine didn't know the man's name. He'd only met him an hour ago. 'Are you ready?'

'This isn't the way it's done,' said Stine. 'The relationship between the halls and the House is very delicate. We don't abuse it. There's too much at stake. Our livelihoods—'

'Stine—'

'Listen to me! If these people are agents of the Inquisition, then they cannot be allowed access to the House. We are very strict about this.'

'What? You jewellers gonna club together and take out an Inquisition team? I don't think so.'

'It's been done before,' Stine said haughtily. 'I think you underestimate how zealously we protect our interests or how capable the halls of Berynth are. Usually it doesn't come to that. We detect Inquisitorial approaches and frustrate them with false leads or dead ends. Since the foundation of the hive, no ordo agent has got past us, or close to the House.'

The red-haired man shrugged. 'It'll have to work differently this time. This is an exceptional case, and the halls of Berynth are most definitely out of their depth this time. Now get ready. You have to play your part. We're paying you well enough. It's essential that these people believe they are gaining access to the House through the proper channels. If they suspect for a moment that there's been any funny business, well... then you'll have a problem.'

'With them?'

'With them, and with us, Stine.'

Stine opened a desk drawer, took out a clean polishing cloth, and wiped his damp hands. He tossed the cloth into the back of the drawer and closed it again. He looked up at the red-haired man.

'No,' he said.

'I beg your pardon?'

'No,' the factor repeated. 'I'm not doing this. Call it off.'

'It's way too late for that, Stine.'

'I don't care. I won't be party to this. The halls have far too much to lose to play this kind of game. You will not manipulate me.'

The red-haired man glanced towards the chamber entrance. Two minutes left, maximum. 'Dammit,' he said. He turned to face the factor and reached into his coat. 'I didn't want to have to do this, Stine, but you've backed me into a corner. '

Stine's eyes widened. He took a step backwards, banging his hip against the desk. The man's hand was coming back out of his coat.

Stine was expecting to see a weapon in it, a gun.

The red-haired man was holding something far worse.

It was an Inquisitorial rosette.

LUCIC LED KYS and Ballack along the Promenade St Jakob. Lucic had dressed smartly for the occasion in a dark suit and a brown leather coat, both a little old, but respectable. He'd lacquered his hair. Ballack and Kys

wore rather finer clothes, the image of understated wealth. Ballack carried a small grey case.

Lucic stopped a few hundred metres from the hall's main entrance, and drew them over to the promenade railing. A steady flow of well-to-do and stately clients moved past them in both directions.

'Now,' said Lucic, 'follow my lead and do as I indicate. One wrong move, and you can forget everything. The hall will not tolerate games.'

'We understand.' said Kys.

'I hope you do, Mamzel Kine.' said Lucic. He nodded at the case Ballack was carrying. 'Currency bonds?' he asked.

'Notarised wafers.' Ballack replied. 'I trust that will be acceptable.'

+It damn well better had.+

Kys smiled to herself at the touch of Ravenor's mind in her head. It was reassuring to know he was with them, and she knew he was right. Now they were operating rogue, Ravenor's access to funds was limited. Any access to fiscal holdings or trusts would flag them to the ordos. They were living off Ravenor's fast eroding personal resources, the 'small change' he carried with him as an operating budget, and the three hundred and twenty thousand in Ballack's case made a big dent in that reserve.

'Wafers? That's fine.' said Lucic.

+You getting anything on him?+ Kys sent.

+He's wearing a blocker, so, no. I presume that's standard for a man in his position, although it concerns me. It's as if he was expecting a psyker. But we have to go through with it.+

+Good. Right. Of course.+

+Before you ask, I'm getting nothing off the hall either. I cast ahead. The whole place is psy-opaque. Fielding, I think. I'm not surprised by that, though. Standard security practice for a high-class jewellers to be psy-blunted.+

+But you won't be with us once we're inside?+

+No, Patience, I won't. That's regrettable. Remember though, the Emperor protects.+

'Well, if we're ready and we're all clear?' Lucic said.

'As crystal,' said Ballack.

'Let's do it,' Lucic said.

'YOU UNDERSTAND NOW?' the red-haired man asked.

Stine swallowed, and sat down hard. 'The Inquisition...?'

'Has enjoyed regular access to the House for decades, Stine, despite what the halls of Berynth believe. We just don't advertise the fact. The House can be very useful to us. So, forget about keeping the ordos out. We've been inside for years. Concentrate your mind on this particular deal.'

The man stepped closer. 'Stine?'

Stine started and looked up. He was still reeling from the revelation. 'Yes,' he murmured. 'Yes.'

'The people you're about to deal with are the principal agents of a rogue inquisitor. Do you understand? A rogue. A criminal. A mass murderer. He is very dangerous. They are very dangerous. Their actions have led to the slaughter of thousands.'

'Th-thousands?' Stine echoed.

'The disaster on Eustis Majoris eight months ago. That was their doing.'

Stine shuddered. His hall, Berynth, Cyto, the whole Helican sub-sector was still reeling from the great trauma that had afflicted the capital world of the neighbouring subsector. The economy was in spasm.

'We're close,' said the red-haired man quietly, 'but we need to get closer. We need them where we want them, so we can finish them. They're too dangerous to live. Do you understand?'

'I understand.'

'Good. I'm counting on you. Help us with this, and it will go well for Stine and Stine. I might even forget your recent suggestion that your hall

and others may have eliminated ordo agents in the past to protect your own interests.'

'Throne, I didn't mean—'

'Shush, Stine. Clean slate. That's what I'm authorised to offer you in exchange for helping us today. Do your part, give them what they want, and then forget anybody was ever here. Then the Inquisition of Mankind might forget about you too.'

'Very well.' said Stine, rising to his feet. 'Very well. I'll do it.'

'Do what?' the red-haired man asked. 'Tell me again, clearly.'

'I will make them believe they are in and that they are gaining access to the House through the proper channels. You can trust me.'

'Trust you, Stine?' the red-haired man laughed. 'You deal in millions of crowns worth of precious metal and gems. The accumulation of wealth is all that concerns you. Men like you are cut throat and mendacious, hard as corundum. I don't trust you at all, but I'm prepared to count on you this time. Do this, and do it well.'

Stine nodded. 'You can't be here.'

'I'll be in the next room. Through there,' the red-haired man said. 'If anything untoward occurs, I'll be ready.'

'Untoward?'

'Nothing will happen if you do your job right. We don't want it to happen here. I'm just saying.'

A burnished servitor approached.

'They're here.' said the red-haired man. 'Get on with it.'

Stine cleared his throat and walked slowly towards the door.

'WHERE'S THE FACTOR?' Kys asked. They were standing in Stine and Stine's wood-panelled reception chamber.

Lucic looked around awkwardly. 'I'm sure he'll be along,' he began.

'We had an appointment,' said Ballack.

'The factor should be here to greet us,' said Kys.

Lucic was clearly uncomfortable. Kys noticed he was showing too much of the whites of his eyes.

‘Lucic?’

The prospector shrugged an open-handed gesture. ‘I’m sure there’s no problem.’

Ballack looked at Kys. She nodded.

‘We’re leaving,’ she said.

‘No!’ Lucic cried. ‘No, no, just give him a moment, please.’

‘This stinks,’ said Kys. ‘Thanks but no thanks.’

‘Throne’s sake,’ Lucic hissed, ‘this is my reputation on the line. My career. Agenting is where the real money is. I can’t get by on prospecting alone, and if I blow this, Stine and Stine won’t ever touch me again, and they’ll spread the word to the other halls. I’ve put a lot into this.’

‘So have we,’ said Ballack.

‘Please...’ Lucic sighed.

‘My utmost apologies!’ Stine cried, hurrying into the chamber towards them. ‘I am so sorry to have kept you waiting, even for a moment. A servitor was meant to summon me, and he was waylaid. A thousand pardons!’

Lucic looked sidelong at his clients. ‘We’re all right,’ he whispered.

‘Are we?’ Kys mouthed at Ballack. Ballack nodded.

Lucic turned to the beaming factor. ‘Dear Factor Stine,’ he said with a forced grin, ‘not quite the seamless greeting I had led my friends here to expect.’

Stine bowed. ‘Oh, of course not, my dear old good friend Hiram. I will have the entire servitor complex rebooted. The lapse in decorum is unforgivable. I hope I can make amends? Refreshments, perhaps?’

‘Always welcome,’ said Lucic, regaining his composure. ‘May I present Master Gaul and Mamzel Kine?’

The factor came forward, and bowed to each of them in turn. ‘A genuine pleasure. My dear old good friend Hiram has always brought the most

distinguished emptors to Stine and Stine.'

He looked directly at Kys. 'My lady,' he said, 'I fear I was most awfully impolite to you on the occasion of our last meeting. I hope you will forgive my rudeness. We have to be so careful these days, and I quite misjudged you.'

Kys bowed back. 'Factor, I apologised then, and I apologise now. I should never have come to you so bluntly, without proper introduction.'

'Least said, soonest mended.' Stine replied with a cheery gesture. 'Let's begin again fresh. Now... a little amasec, perhaps. We have a last few casks of the Fibula '56, which I would keep to myself, truth be told, but I positively can't offer you anything less magnificent. And some birri truffles wrapped in nap leaves, and some local shellfish, I think. The scallops are prepared fresh by the hall's chefs, hoisted from the sub-ice ocean farms just three hours ago.'

'The scallops or the chefs?' asked Kys.

Stine brayed out a laugh. 'The scallops, naturally! My lady has a fine sense of humour!'

He clapped his hands and directed orders to the waiting servitors.

'Shall we go in?' he ventured. 'I have objects to show you.'

They followed him back into the show galleries. His performance had begun.

Kys had heard it all before. To Stine's credit, it wasn't the same. She had to admit the factor was good at what he did.

He stopped in front of a glass display of exquisite peridot and moonstone settings, in full flow, fluently describing every facet and cut.

Stine stopped suddenly and turned to them with a smile. 'Forgive me for babbling. I get quite carried away. I ought to be telling you about the history of Stine and Stine. Sometimes, I forget myself. I am so enamoured of my hall's work, I get quite incoherent.'

'Does that interest you at all?' he asked.

‘I think I speak for both of us,’ said Ballack, ‘when I say that coherence interests us a great deal.’

+PATIENCE?+

+Hello. We’ve got it. We’re just leaving.+

Lucic led them out onto the promenade. With a final bow, the factor bade them adieu. ‘An excellent choice,’ he said, kissing Kys’s hand.

‘I hope so,’ said Kys.

‘It’s been a genuine pleasure spending this time with you,’ Stine said, his performance drawing towards its curtain call.

‘You’ve been most obliging, sir,’ Ballack said to the factor with a bow.

‘If I can be of any further service,’ Stine gushed.

‘My thanks again, as ever,’ said Lucic. Stine bowed for the thousandth time, and backed away into the hall.

Kys looked at Ballack. ‘We’re clear?’

‘We’re clear.’

‘Thank Throne that’s over,’ Kys muttered.

‘Let’s keep walking,’ Lucic advised. ‘Come on now, briskly. I’m uncomfortable with you carrying that around in a public place. Even on the Promenade St Jakob, there are unscrupulous elements.’

That was the three hundred and ten thousand crown horolog piece that now occupied Ballack’s case. Kys and Ballack trailed Lucic down the promenade.

‘What happens now?’ Kys asked.

‘Depends. How quickly do you want it to happen?’ Lucic asked.

‘Quickly, the next few hours.’

Lucic nodded. ‘Good. It’s better that way. The cue Stine sold me for the House has an expiry date. The House moves.’

‘We understand that.’

‘Fine. So long as you do. Two hours then, in underboat pen seventy-two. We can make the exchange there. How many people will be in your party?’

‘No,’ said Kys. ‘We have our own transport arranged. You meet us.’

‘That’s not how it works,’ said Lucic.

‘It is now,’ said Ballack.

‘No, no,’ said Lucic. ‘You’ll screw this up!’

‘It’s how we want it,’ said Ballack. ‘Adjust. I’m sure you’re capable. Boat pen sixty-one, two hours from now.’

‘Then I’m coming with you,’ said Lucic.

‘No, you’re not,’ Ballack smiled.

‘You want to use your own damn transport, fine!’ Lucic snapped. ‘But I’m coming with you. You’ll need me. Cue or no cue, the House will blank you if you arrive in an unauthorised transport. You need me still.’

‘You can get us in?’

‘All part of the price. You have to take me along.’

Ballack nodded. ‘Pen sixty-one. Two hours.’

‘I’ll be there,’ said Lucic, and strode away into the crowds.

‘What do you think?’ Kys asked.

‘I think he’s rotten to the core,’ Ballack replied, ‘but he’s all we’ve got. We have to run with this.’

Patience Kys sighed. ‘Like we had to run with Stine of Stine and Stine. I know. I still wish I could have killed the obsequious bastard, though.’

STINE OF STINE and Stine walked slowly back into the hall’s main chamber of display and sat down heavily in the chair behind the simple wooden desk.

‘You did good,’ said the red-haired man, emerging from the shadows.

‘That’s all very well,’ Stine grumbled.

‘Here’s your reward,’ the red-haired man said.

A man much larger than the red-haired man plodded out of the shadows. He was wearing heavy power armour, but he made very little sound. He handed a weapon to the red-haired man. The red-haired man activated the blade. It made a shrill, grating whine.

‘Chainsword,’ said the red-haired man lightly.

He raised the whirring weapon, and swung it at Stine. Stine was too astonished to attempt any evasion. The chainsword struck him on the left arm just below the shoulder, and carried on through, slicing him laterally across the upper chest. Stine’s head and shoulders, like a statuary bust, flopped backwards over the chair back, and his arms, severed at the top of the biceps, dropped leadenly onto the ground. The top half of the chair’s back rest, severed along with the upper part of Factor Stine, hit the floor too. Upholstery padding fluffed into the air like thistledown. Pressurised arterial blood squirted from the factor’s anatomically cross-sectioned body in shuddering jets and splattered noisily across the top of the wooden desk.

The red-haired man stepped back sharply in order to avoid getting splashed. He deactivated the chainsword and handed it back to the larger, armoured man beside him.

‘No one leaves Stine and Stine alive,’ he said. ‘Make sure of it.’

‘No one?’

‘End of story.’

‘No problem,’ said the armoured man. He reactivated the chainsword so it was buzzing in his fist and clicked his link as he walked away across the chamber. ‘All teams, attention. Deploy, and execute everyone in the building.’



EIGHT

THE UNDERBOAT NAYL had leased left pen sixty-one three hours later. It was a chisel-nosed grey tube of steel and ceramite twenty-four metres long, with a quiet cavitation drive along the centreline and two heavy-bladed propulsion fans fixed ventrally in cage nacelles.

It descended into the oily murk of the pen, lit up stablights on its prow frame, and purred out through the pen mouth.

The pen's sea doors opened into a long, square-cut channel of blue ice and then out into the open water beyond the subframe of the giant hive. They passed gigantic foundation struts and derricks, brown with tar and mineral deposits that jutted down through the ice pack and disappeared far below into the black deeps. A few bulk capacity underboats went by along the same channel, inbound to the hive, laden with ore. Their stablight rigs were lit up like the lures of abyssal fish.

There were nine people on board the craft: Ravenor, Thonius, Ballack, Kys, Plyton, Nayl and the Carthaen, along with Lucic and the pilot servitor Nayl had leased along with the boat.

'Quite a crowd you travel with,' Lucic commented to Kys when he joined them at the pen quay.

'Names don't matter,' Kys replied.

'I wasn't asking for any,' Lucic told her, though his gaze lingered on Ravenor's support chair. Lucic had come dressed in dirty work clothes: a faded, patched bodyglove, furs and a quilted coat. He also carried a grubby shoulder pack.

'Weapons?' Ballack asked him.

'Just tools of the trade,' Lucic replied, offering up the pack so Ballack could wand it.

Lucic chose to ride up front with Nayl and the pilot. From the main passenger trunk, a Spartan space with drop down seats, they could see forward into the pilot house through the open hatch. Instrumentation glowed below the gloomy forward ports. Lucic was sensible enough not to attempt conversation with Nayl. Once they had reached open water, Nayl handed him the grey case containing the very expensive timepiece. Lucic looked inside briefly, put the case with his pack, and accessed the navigation punch-box on the instrument panel. He entered a nineteen digit code. The cue. Screens blinked and rolled as graphics redrew and remapped. Then a spidery red chart came up, with route and way-marker graphics overlaid in white.

‘That’s some distance,’ Nayl said.

‘Eight hours minimum,’ said Lucic, ‘provided we don’t encounter any holdups.’

‘Holdups?’ Nayl asked.

‘Ice-falls. Sub-currents. That’s probably the worst we might get, this season of the year.’

‘There’s worse?’

‘There’s maelstroms. Believe me, if there was any chance we’d run into one of those, we wouldn’t have left the pen.’

Nayl pointed to the nav display. ‘Is that the House?’

Lucic shook his head. ‘The House is currently sitting ’neath side about forty kilometres south south-west of that. The chart resolution’s too large to show it. That’s Berynth Eighty-Eight, one of the deep water mining rigs, sitting in a two-kilometre hole it’s made for itself in the pack ice. That’s our excuse for heading out that way. We’ll divert when we reach Eighty-Eight.’

The others made themselves comfortable in the passenger trunk. Plyton leaned by one of the small armoured port lights, craning her neck to see up and out. They were three hundred metres down, and the water was black and clear like glass, but above them, it graduated into a green twilight.

‘Creepy,’ she murmured.

Angharad glanced at her.

‘All this water on top of us. The pressure. The cold. Even if you could reach the surface, there is no surface. Just a roof of ice.’

Angharad shrugged and looked away. Little seemed to impress her.

‘The whole ocean’s covered in pack ice, right?’ Plyton asked.

‘The whole thing,’ Ravenor replied, ‘apart from a few anomalous breaks. In most places, the pack is five or six hundred metres thick. Quite a roof.’

Plyton grimaced. ‘A fine time to discover I’m claustrophobic,’ she said.

‘You’ve travelled in the void,’ Angharad said. ‘Compared to that, this is nothing.’

‘It’ll kill you just as fast,’ said Plyton. ‘Besides, we can all have our own private fears, can’t we?’

‘I do not have private fears,’ said Angharad. That made Plyton laugh.

‘Any life out there?’ Plyton asked.

‘Algae. Aggregated bacteria. Phytoplankton. There may be no sunlight, but the moon’s excessively active. A lot of thermal venting.’

‘Anything bigger than that?’

‘No. There are rumours, but no.’

‘Cold,’ said Plyton, glancing back out.

‘It’s deep, too,’ Ravenor said. ‘The ocean floor depth varies, but in some places it’s technically immeasurable.’

‘Immeasurable?’ asked Plyton.

‘Abyssal.’

‘What do you mean, immeasurable?’

‘I mean it’s so deep, any instrument sent down to sound it is crushed by the extremity of pressure.’

‘What about auspex? Modar?’

‘That deep, that cold, that pressurised, the water starts to behave in very strange ways. It doesn’t give up its secrets. You were right, Maud. In some ways it is much, much more dangerous than the void. The deep ocean of

Utochre may be one of the strangest places in the Imperium. Which is probably why the House is here.'

'Are you telling me this to reassure me?' Plyton asked, slightly pale.

'One can face one's private fears better if one understands their limits, I always think. I was giving you the best information I could.'

'That below us is a freaky abyss that we don't understand and could never escape from?' Plyton asked.

Ravenor was silent for a moment. 'I probably shouldn't have opened my mouth,' he said.

He moved across the cabin to where Kys was sitting.

+Just so you know, we're out of contact. The vox isn't making it through the water and the ice, not even via a relay at the hive. Something – the ice I think, but I don't know why – is bouncing psychic transmission. We can't talk to Kara.+

'You spoke to her before we left?'

+Just before. She knows what we're doing. I told her not to start fretting unless a week went by.+

Ravenor saw that Kys was still silently staring forward, keeping an eye on Lucic through the pilot house hatch.

+Can we trust him?+

'No,' she said, 'not at all. He's in it for the money, I think. Besides, it's too late now.'

+And if he proves untrustworthy?+

'We're all armed. That kind of cancels everything out.'

LUCIC'S ESTIMATE TURNS out to be conservative. It takes the best part of eleven hours just to reach the vicinity of the Berynth Eighty-Eight deep water rig. He blames contra-currents, and an undertow effect called the Neath Stream, which cannot be predicted. Strange, on a moon where prediction is the most exclusive commodity.

The journey becomes laborious. There's nothing but the sluggish purr of the cavitation system. The underboat's enviro-systems are not the best, and it grows colder and the air stales. I sense the discomfort of the others, the body stink of anxiety and confinement. Maud is the worst. Her unexpected claustrophobia becomes physically oppressive to her. I do not ware Maud, nor would I attempt to without her consent, except in the most critical of situations, but I extend psy-feelers gently into the periphery of her mindscape and work to reduce her clogging panic by influencing her respiratory rate and slowing her pulse. I adjust her metabolism into an instrument to fight her fears.

Her mind, as I nestle against it, is in retreat, like a sick animal. I swim in her surface thoughts, her petty tensions and spectral fears. That's when I see the footprint.

It's been carefully disguised, like a track in snow scuffed over to conceal it. It's been so carefully disguised, I cannot be sure it's what I think it is without a more invasive probe, and this isn't the time or the place for that.

But I know what I think it is. I know what my years of experience scream to me it is.

Sometime in the last two or three days, another mind has been in her. Another presence has taken a much firmer hold of Maud Plyton than I am doing with my light psy-caresses. She has been, briefly, under considerable mental duress.

From who? And how? I haven't read another psyker, and she's hardly been out of my company. Kys couldn't do this, and why would she? Now I feel a creeping dread upon me. What have I missed? What's been in amongst my people without my permission, or even my knowledge? Lucic wears a blocker. Is there more to that casual insurance? Is he blocking the outside, or is he hiding something? Or is it...

I try to reassure myself. The footprint could be false, a side-effect of Maud's troubled state that I am this-reading. Then again, her troubled state, her sudden claustrophobia, could have been triggered by aggressive manipulation.

I broaden my mind for a moment, and cast around. I feel the other heartbeats and minds around me, together with the hard negative of Lucic. Everyone's on edge, except Angharad, who is still and cold and silent like a pool. Nayl is restless, Ballack and Carl are both closed off and busy with thoughts of their own. Kys feels me stir and looks up, a question on her face.

+It's nothing, Patience. Relax.+

It's not nothing. What has done this?

I reach outside the underboat, but the sea is too cold and too blank for me to extend far.

'EIGHTY-EIGHT,' LUCIC announced. The sound of the underboat's drive systems altered slightly as the pilot brought the craft around and slowed it. The sea ahead was lighter, more radiant.

Nayl studied the console displays, and saw the vast hole, an artificial polynya, in the roof of ice above. Berynth Eighty-Eight was a filthy, gargantuan engine sticking up out of the hole like a dagger in a wound. The lower limbs of the mining rig, its huge drilling members, extended down into the lightless depths below, churning up cloud banks of heated silt.

'Vox links are live,' Nayl said.

'The rig will have a fleet of boats down on operation, guiding the drilling,' Lucic replied.

'Lots of backwash litter too,' Nayl added, adjusting the listening scopes and the detectors to wash out the noise and minimise interference.

The rig's drill engines, circulator pumps and hydraulics,' Lucic replied, 'not to mention signals chopped and bounced by rising silt, and the suck-rattle of the excavation tubes, and the low-level vibration of the icebreaker systems keeping the hole open. The sea's a funny place. 'Neath side, you have to get used to a lot of data clutter, and learn not to trust the sensors all the time.'

He made a course adjustment with the pilot servitor's approval. The underboat nosed slowly around, and slugged away on a fresh track, skirting the industrial site and its cloud of noise.

They were running under the ice again in five minutes, heading south south-west into clearer, colder water. The rig noise gradually receded behind them.

'This water is colder,' said Nayl, reading off the instruments. 'Six or seven points and falling.'

'That's because the sea bed just dropped away under us,' said Lucic. He glanced at the pilot, who nodded confirmation. 'We just went off over the Berynth Shelf. Eighty-Eight mines out about as far as there is ocean floor to reach. We just crossed from deep water to what we call Wholly Water.'

'Holy water?'

'Wholly,' Lucic repeated with a lean grin, 'as in there's wholly nothing below us any more. We're out over the abyssal zone.'

Nayl woofed out a breath. 'Don't tell Maud,' he said.

'Which one is Maud?' asked Lucic, looking back into the passenger trunk.

Nayl didn't tell him.

Lucic grinned wider and shook his head. 'Deep ocean, my friend. We're in deep ocean now.'

'I'm not your friend,' Nayl said sullenly.

Lucic shrugged. 'You might want to reconsider that. Out here, all alone, a man needs all the friends he can get.'

'SHOLTO?'

The little shipmaster didn't look up immediately. He was sitting at the master control of the *Arethusa's* bridge, with Fyflank and two of his most senior crewmen huddled around his shoulders.

Kara approached. She'd slept, but not well. That surprised her, given that she was buoyant with relief. She'd had another dream in which Carl had come to her in some wild, desert place, and done nothing but laugh. She'd

asked him questions, asked him why he was acting so strangely, and he'd just laughed at her. She'd woken in a cold sweat, sharply and suddenly, the headache pounding her temples. Belknap had been deep asleep in the bed beside her, his limbs twisted in the curious, boneless attitude of intense exhaustion slumber. She'd lain awake beside him for five minutes and then jumped when the vox intercom beeped. Leaping up gingerly, naked, she'd hit the stud before the second beep, hoping it wouldn't rouse Belknap.

'Kara,' she had whispered.

'Might it be permeable for you to come to the bridge, with all effluviancy?'

'Problem?'

'A very curiousnessity.'

'I'll be there in five.'

She had dressed in silence. Belknap hadn't stirred.

'Master Sholto?' she said again.

Fyflank and the crew mates looked around at her, and backed away to make space for her. She stepped in closer and crouched down beside the shipmaster's raised seat.

'Mistress Kara,' Sholto said, glancing around with a thin smile. He looked awful: pale, jowly, drawn.

'Sholto, are you all right?'

He shook his head. 'Forgive my unsanguine bearing. I fancy I took a little too much numbskull last night with your gentleman, the good doctor. He is a drinker of thirst, and I was thirsty, but not, in point all goodly made, a drinker.'

'You have a hangover?' she smiled, relaxing slightly.

'A terrible head, as you ask, all of throbbing and whimsy. Never again, as I have told myself before. And such dreams, as I had. Quite a colostomy of nightmares.'

'Why did you send for me, Sholto? Is it Ravenor? Has he signalled?'

Unwerth shook his head. ‘The grid has lit twice, with no reponderance from our friends below. They remonstrate themselves beyond our call. I sent for you because I was sent for in turn, so as it—’

‘Sholto?’ Kara said firmly.

He nodded. ‘I will cut to the cheese. Master Boguin was sitting night watch—’

One of the crewmen behind her, a portly fellow from Ur-Haven with less than adequate hygiene or dental maintenance, nodded expressively. ‘Master Boguin was on night watch,’ Unwerth continued, ‘here at this veritable station, and he detected a noise.’

‘A noise?’

‘A noise, in all certainty.’ Kara frowned. ‘A noise?’ she repeated.

Unwerth fiddled with the vox dials. ‘I’m trying to locale it again.’

‘What sort of noise?’ Kara asked. Unwerth shrugged. ‘Well, internal or external source?’ To her dismay, Unwerth shrugged again.

Kara breathed carefully. Her head was killing her. ‘Sholto, I’m trying to be patient. What are you talking about?’

‘There’s something here,’ Master Boguin said. Fyflank growled in support.

‘Get up,’ said Kara. She was in no mood for this. Unwerth hopped down from the master’s seat and let her take his place. He stood on the deck beside her.

Kara settled down. She started to adjust the console controls. ‘You’re getting a vox signal? Another ship? Or just back-chatter traffic from Utochre’s vox-space?’ Sholto Unwerth simply shrugged again.

Kara gently turned the dials. A ghost frequency fluttered across the scope. ‘There!’ Unwerth said. ‘I saw it. Hang on.’

She made some alterations. The signal wave became cleaner. Kara peered at it. ‘That could be another vessel, pinging us with its primary auspex.’

‘In all assurity, there is no other vessel in range.’

‘I think you’re right,’ said Kara. ‘It’s not external. This print is a signal coming from inside the ship. Let me just—’

She halted suddenly, froze.

‘What is it?’ Unwerth asked.

She didn’t dare tell him. She was looking at her hands as they worked the instruments. Her right hand. There was a ring on the middle finger of her right hand, a ring that didn’t belong to her, and that she had no memory of putting on.

In one awful, sweeping moment, she was sure it was one of Carl’s.

‘Shit!’ she cried, pulling her hands back from the station as if stung. She tried to pull the ring off. It wouldn’t budge.

Unwerth was still staring at the flickering signal, a yellow zigzag pulse that rippled like a cardiogram across the vox-screen.

He leant in and made a final, tiny adjustment, locking the signal down. The noise came over the speakers.

It made all of them shiver.

It was the sound of a grown man, sobbing. It went on and on, shuddering tinnily from the console speakers, sob after sob, a wracking pain.

‘What in hell’s name is that?’ Kara whispered. She tried to sound defiant, but her words wilted as they came out. Her guts were like ice. ‘Where’s that coming from?’

‘I know not,’ said Unwerth, ‘except that I don’t like it.’

He reached one of his mutilated hands over towards the vox-system’s main switch and threw it, shutting the system down. The screen went blank and the chasing zigzag signal wave vanished.

But the sound of the sobbing man kept coming from the speakers.



NINE

‘YOU HAD BETTER see this,’ Nayl said.

They were thirteen hours into the trip. The pilot servitor was suddenly slowing the cavitation system and back-thrusting with the ventral fans. Kys came forward into the pilot house and let Ravenor use her eyes.

‘There’s your Wych House,’ Nayl said.

The underboat’s rigged stablights were illuminating something in the murk ahead, a structure suspended below the glowing roof of ice.

‘Oh God-Emperor,’ Kys muttered, craning forward between Nayl and Lucic.

‘Quite a thing, isn’t it?’ the prospector said.

The Wych House was an armoured metallic orb three hundred metres in diameter. ‘Neath side, everything was upside down. The orb was supported on five articulated mechanical legs, which gripped the canopy of ice above them. As they approached, the House scuttled back a few paces, its bladed claws scuffing the ’neath side of the ice cover. It was walking on the underside of the pack ice as if the pack ice was land.

‘There’s a legend on Loki,’ Nayl began. ‘The hut of a witch that runs through the forest on the legs of a game bird.’

‘Baba Yagga’s hut,’ Kys murmured.

+Baba Yagga’s hut.+

‘Baba Yagga,’ Nayl nodded. ‘You’ve heard of it?’

+It’s not an old Loki legend. It’s an Old Earth legend.+

‘That so?’ asked Nayl.

+That is so. Bring us in.+

Nayl glanced at the pilot. ‘Bring us in.’

Lucic shook his head. 'Wait. I need to broadcast the proper greetings. If we just close in, it'll run.'

'Run?'

'I've seen it run, if it's scared, or feels threatened. It can out run this boat.'

+Send the greetings.+

'My boss says send the greetings, Lucic.' Kys relayed.

'He's a psyker, then?' Lucic asked. 'I thought as much.'

Kys and Nayl exchanged looks. 'At this stage,' Nayl said, 'we really don't care what you think, Lucic. Send the greeting. Do what we paid you to do or you'll be leaving this underboat through the wet-lock with no breathing apparatus and a bullet up your arse.'

'I don't answer for him,' said Kys quietly, 'but he's more than capable of that, so don't piss him off.'

Lucic pursed his lips and entered a contact code into the underboat's transponder. He checked it for fidelity once, and then pressed 'broadcast'.

They heard and felt the pulse of the system through the hull.

They waited.

'Does it usually take this long?' asked Kys.

Lucic tapped a long, scrawny finger against his bony chin. 'No. The House is worried. Nervous. Probably because we're bringing a psyker aboard.'

'It can sense that?' Nayl wondered. He saw the look on Lucic's face and shrugged. 'Of course it can.'

Kys leaned forward suddenly. 'It's sending something. Throne, missiles?'

Nayl leaned on the controls. Two darting shapes had burst from the Wych House and were racing towards them, leaving bubble tracks in the semi-glazed water behind them.

'Relax,' said Lucic, 'pilot fish.'

The missiles slowed as they neared the underboat, and turned, flashing and pulsing. The pilot servitor underwent some form of seizure, and began

to act mechanically. His mind and systems were locked to the navigation systems of the Wych House. He steered them in, following the blinking pilot fish skimming just ahead of them.

The bulk of the Wych House loomed over the little underboat. They were being drawn up into a lighted cavity on the underside of the armoured orb.

The pilot fish zipped in ahead of them and vanished.

‘We’re going in,’ said Nayl.

‘Lock and load,’ Ravenor ordered from the passenger trunk. Angharad rose and clutched her sheathed steel. Maud Plyton got up and racked her combat shotgun. Ballack drew his laspistol and checked its heat. Carl rose to his feet and double-clicked the slide on his autopistol.

Nayl flipped his handgun out of its rig, banged back the slide, and put it away again. He glanced at Kys.

‘You ready?’

Kys had slid out two kineblades, one in each hand. She nodded.

‘We’re ready,’ Nayl announced.

The underboat slowly entered the House’s docking pool.

HUGE HYDRAULIC CLAMPS had once lifted underboats in and out of the docking pool and secured them to the wharf, but rust and neglect had long since rendered them useless. They protruded like the rotting claws of behemoth crabs from the gantry, trailing streamers of calcite and algae into the soupy dock basin. As the underboat surfaced, its fans blowing and sputtering the grease ice coating the pool’s surface, Lucic opened the upper hatch, and climbed out to make them steady, using dirty old chains and hooks that dangled from the gantry piers.

The docking pool was dim, illuminated only by the underboat’s light rig and a few faded lumin strips high up in the arched roof. The skeletal bulk of the gantry wharf and the perished docking clamps made distressing silhouettes above them, and the light cast wan, foggy reflections off the slowly wallowing, viscous surface of the pool. A pair of corroded metal ladders allowed them to clamber up onto the wharf platform. Nayl opened

the larger side hatch so that Ravenor could move out and rise to the walkway.

‘Bad air,’ muttered Carl. The House’s atmosphere held the sickly tang of an air supply recirculated and poorly scrubbed too many times, like a starship that had been sealed in transit for too long. There was no sound, except for the slap of the grease ice, the dying thump of the underboat’s fans, and the brittle clump of their footsteps. Nayl, Lucic and Plyton switched on lamp packs.

‘Cold,’ Plyton shivered, buttoning her coat. Her mood seemed to have lifted, however, now she was out of the underboat’s drab metal confines. ‘This way,’ said Lucic, and set off down the walkway. ‘Why don’t they keep this place in good order?’ Carl wondered aloud. ‘It’s not a way station or a depot,’ Lucic replied, gesturing with one gangly arm. ‘The residents of the House expect those who come here to be perfectly capable of leaving again without supply or repair.’ ‘Residents?’ Ravenor asked. ‘How many?’ Lucic shrugged. ‘They don’t tell me things like that. Come on.’ Ballack and Nayl pushed past him to lead the way. The metal surfaces of the decks, walls and machinery around them were caked in rust, or limed with verdigris and blooms of algae. There was an open, unlit hatchway at the back of the wharf platform, a hatchway that had clearly been open for so long, corrosion would not allow it to be sealed again.

The deck beneath them shuddered. All the loose chains and hanging filaments in the dock swayed and clanked. Every weapon in the party rose ready.

‘Don’t panic,’ said Lucic, ‘the House just took a step to steady itself. Get used to the sensation.’

The hatch led through into a service tunnel where the lights had long since burned dead, or had been robbed out for spares. Their weaving lamp beams caught strange surface mottling on the walls, but it wasn’t rust.

‘Look at this,’ said Carl, training his lamp. The area of wall he was illuminating was entirely covered in a curious, tight patterning that appeared to have been etched. As he moved the beam around slowly, they

could see that the pattern covered everything. ‘What is that?’ Kys asked, leaning close. ‘Fingerprints,’ said Angharad. ‘No, it can’t—’

‘Fingerprints,’ the Carthaen repeated.

‘She’s right,’ Ravenor said, his transponder a dry rattle in the darkness beside them. ‘Human fingerprints.’

The prints were life size, packed in so close to each other that barely a scrap of wall remained unmarked. They looked as if they had been left by thousands upon thousands of finger touches, but the touch of a fingertip did not excise its shape perfectly into bare metal in miniature bas-relief. ‘They must have been engraved,’ said Carl, ‘but the workmanship is astonishing. Who has the time to engrave so many individual, perfect marks?’

‘This is the House.’ Lucic replied, in an annoyingly off-hand way. ‘What’s really astonishing,’ said Ravenor, ‘is that every single print is different.’

A ripple of deep unease ran through them. For the first time, Ravenor felt the inscrutable Angharad register a scintilla of fear.

THE SERVICE TUNNEL continued on for thirty metres and opened into a wide, drum-shaped chamber. This was also unlit. Their lamp beams revealed a rickety metal spiral staircase against one wall, leading up into the shadows to a roof hatch. The centre of the chamber was occupied by a cargo hoist, a cage of machinery surrounding a low, rectangular plinth crusted in filth and oil residue. Above it in the ceiling the dim space of a riser shaft yawned like a throat. The rest of the chamber was cluttered with metal litter and rusting machine junk. There were two other doors, both of them sealed forever by rust and decay.

Like the service tunnel, every part of the chamber’s walls was covered with fingerprints. ‘Do we go up?’ asked Nayl. ‘We wait,’ said Lucic. ‘For what?’

‘Just wait. We can’t rush them. This is their party now.’ They waited in edgy silence. The House rocked gently again, as it took another adjusting

step. This—’ said Plyton.

‘Shhhhhh!’ said Nayl. He was gazing up into the open darkness of the riser shaft above them.

A light came on far above them. It was thin and washy, a dirty fuzz of yellow radiance that penetrated only very faintly to their level. There was a distant, muffled thump of heavy gear, then a grinding noise. The hoist was descending.

It came down the shaft slowly, bringing the wash of light with it. The hoist was an open-sided, rectangular platform that matched exactly the dimensions of the plinth at the foot of the shaft. It lowered into view and settled with a resounding metal clang. Half a dozen mismatched oil lamps and bottle tapers stood on the platform, higgeldy-piggeldy, shedding their dirty, smoky glow. A figure stood in their midst, short, slender, like a youth or a child. The figure was shrouded in a hooded, floor-length cloak, and no face could be detected under the cowl. Ravenor hesitated from scanning. He did not want to provoke the residents of the House.

The figure wore an old, large, rusty key on a ribbon around its neck. It looked like the sort of antique key that might have once opened the gatehouse of a pre-Heresy bastion.

The figure gazed at them.

‘These people come seeking coherence.’ Lucic called out, taking a step forward. There was a nervous tremor in his voice. ‘I am their guide.’

For a brief moment, there was a murmur of voices in the air around them, an unintelligible flutter of whispering, hissing voices, overlapped and urgent.

Then it died away. The figure raised its left hand and beckoned them onto the hoist platform with a single, slow gesture.

As Ravenor steered his chair onto the platform, he knew he’d just tasted the first, undeniable trace of the Wych House’s psykcraft.



TEN

THE HOIST CARRIED them slowly up eighty metres of rusty riser shaft into a vast circular theatre that was lit around its edges by thousands of candles and lamps. The floor was formed of metal grille plates, and arranged on a split level, with a raised ring walkway around the outside of the chamber divided by an iron handrail from a circular central floor space. There were several heavy duty hatches at intervals around the chamber walls.

The hoist platform brought them up on the edge of the inner floor space. Above them, at the limits of the candlelight, the theatre chamber's domed roof was a mass of support girders and heavy black frames in shadow.

They looked around, assessing their circumstances. Their weapons were sheathed and bolstered, so as not to cause problems, but they were ready.

Angharad glanced at Nayl and nodded across the chamber. On the far side from the hoist, the room's raised ring walkway had a broad set of seven metal steps set into its lip, virtually identical to the set that rose from the centre floor space to the ring walkway itself. This upper set interrupted the encircling handrail and jutted out into the chamber over the inner floor space, leading to nothing.

They'd all seen it. Nayl glanced up into the roofs shadows. Was there something concealed up there that required step access when it descended?

The robed figure walked off the platform onto the lower level. They followed, halting as the figure stopped and turned to face them again.

'Hell's teeth!' Nayl growled.

A dozen more hooded figures, identical to the first, were suddenly standing on the raised walkway above them, staring down. They'd heard no hatch open. There had been no flicker of the candles. Each of the newcomers had a key around its neck, but no two keys were identical.

‘Someone say something,’ Plyton whispered. ‘The tension is killing me.’

Another flutter of sighing, hissing voices breathed around them. Ravenor tentatively reached out with his mind. The situation was precarious, but he dared not wait any longer. Immediately, he encountered a strong background aura of psychic activity. The place was alive with it, as if it saturated the walls and the deck. It was resonating in a slow, gentle pulse, like breathing, but it wasn’t coming from the hooded figures. They were utterly blank and inert to his inspection. The aura was around them all, as if they stood within a vast, psy-active mind.

Or as if the ocean outside was alive.

‘I have come seeking coherence,’ Ravenor said. Lucic made no objection. He stood back.

‘I have come seeking coherence,’ Ravenor repeated.

The figure that had brought them up on the hoist had walked slowly up the steps to join the others of its kind on the raised walkway.

‘Do you have names? Voices?’ Ravenor asked.

‘We have both,’ said one of the figures. Its speech was audible and precise, though little more than a murmur in volume. The voice seemed young too, although it was impossible to tell whether it was male or female.

‘Will you tell me your names?’ Ravenor asked.

‘Will you tell us yours?’

‘Is that essential for our transaction?’

‘No,’ said another of the figures, ‘though to receive accurate coherence, you must be truly known. This is not our function. It is up to the House to know you.’

‘What is your function?’

‘We are merely housekeepers.’

‘I see, and how will the House know me?’

‘It is learning already. You may speed the process by explaining your incoherence.’

Ravenor swung his chair around and faced Plyton. ‘Maud?’

‘Sir?’

‘I’d like you to escort Mr Lucic back down the hoist to our craft and watch over him there.’

‘Wait—’ Lucic began.

‘Does our guide need to be here any longer?’ Ravenor asked the hooded figures.

‘His function is complete.’

‘The housekeepers have spoken, Lucic.’ Ravenor told the prospector. ‘I thank you for your services of guidance and introduction, but I don’t want you around while this is happening. Remove yourself, stay with the underboat, and we can remain friends.’

Lucic glanced around, agitated and clearly unhappy. He knew he wasn’t in a situation where he could put up an effective argument or fight. He forced a beaming grin onto his slender face, and bowed. ‘Of course,’ he said, ‘I have no wish to fall out with you. Out here, a man needs all the friends he can get.’

Plyton gestured with the muzzle of the shotgun slung over her shoulder. ‘Let’s go,’ she said.

+Watch him, Maud.+

Plyton nodded. She was still not used to directly sent thoughts. She followed Lucic onto the hoist platform, pulled the lever, and they slowly dropped below the floor.

Ravenor turned back to face the housekeepers.

‘Explain what I can do in more detail.’

‘Describe the parameters of your incoherence, in plain terms,’ one of the housekeepers replied. ‘Allow the House to know you.’

‘And how is coherence communicated?’

‘The right key opens the right door.’ said a housekeeper.

Ravenor’s companions exchanged troubled looks.

Ravenor rolled his chair forward until he was directly beneath the watching housekeepers on the raised walkway. 'I seek coherence,' he announced, as if speaking not to them but to the chamber as a whole. 'My name is Gideon Ravenor. There's no point hiding that. I am searching for someone... a great enemy of mine, there's no point hiding that fact either. He has eluded me for a long time, and driven me into a state of near ruin in my efforts to find him. The stars are a vast place, and he could be anywhere. I decided it would be better to search for something or someone that could tell me where and how to find him, than to spend lifetimes searching for him fruitlessly. The Wych House of Utochre has a great and ancient reputation for prediction. It is said the House's accuracy in such matters is extraordinary. In my past life, I was an Imperial inquisitor and a loyal servant of the Ordos Helican. To seek out the guidance and psykcraft of a place such as this would have been deemed the act of a radical or a heretic. It would not have been remotely condoned by the men I called my masters. But I am rogue now, and desperate, and I am acting outside the scope, knowledge and permission of the Holy Inquisition. I am no longer an inquisitor. Perhaps I am damned, but I'll surely be damned if I don't know.'

The whispering voices of the House billowed around them. They reminded Kys uncomfortably of the rushing wings of the sheen birds at Petropolis. She was fighting the desire to weep. Ravenor's spoken admission, even if it had been uttered with unnecessary emphasis to convince the Wych House, had been painful to hear. *I am no longer an inquisitor. Perhaps I am damned.*

Perhaps they were all damned.

'The one I seek goes by the name of Zygmunt Molotch,' Ravenor said.

The voices swirled, their whispers becoming more sibilant and sharp. They streamed around Ravenor like an eddying wind, like the frail sighs of phantoms.

Now they could all hear what the voices were saying.

Molotch, Molotch, Molotch...

AT THE BASE of the riser shaft, down in the gloom, Plyton led Lucic off the platform. She turned, dragged back the lever, and allowed the empty platform to trundle back up the shaft.

‘How do we get back up?’ Lucic asked.

‘Please Throne we don’t have to,’ Plyton replied. They both carried oil lamps taken from the platform. By the light of hers, Plyton indicated the spiral staircase. ‘That’s got to lead up somewhere,’ she said, ‘if needs be, but they need to hoist more than we do. Come on.’

They walked back along the service tunnel towards the docking pool.

‘So, you’re Maud,’ said Lucic lightly.

‘Don’t talk to me,’ she replied.

They stepped back out into the gloomy wharf area, amongst the hanging, rusty chainwork and rotting machinery. The underboat sat quietly below them, moored against the wharfs fenders by the heavy sea chains Lucic had fixed. The underboat’s top and side hatches were still open, and pale electric light shone out.

‘Checking in,’ Plyton said into her link.

The pilot servitor’s voice crackled back an acknowledgement.

‘Well, we could be in for a long wait,’ Lucic said, sitting down on the pier’s edge so his feet dangled over the drop into the pool. He set the lamp down beside him. ‘How will we pass the time if not in friendly conversation, Maud?’

‘Don’t talk to me,’ she replied.



ELEVEN

‘I HAVE A theory,’ Carl said.

‘About?’ Ravenor asked.

‘About how this place might work,’ Carl said. They were still waiting down on the theatre’s lower space. The housekeepers had not moved or spoken, not even when the empty hoist returned. The flutter of whispers came and went like a breeze.

‘Go on,’ Ravenor prompted.

‘I don’t think it’s the House itself. There might be some active material or device here that acts as a focus, but I think what really matters is where the House is.’

‘Interesting. Go on.’

‘I think it’s the ocean. I think it’s the ocean itself. Somehow, that responds and resonates to...’ he faltered. ‘Actually, my theory is rather weak and open-ended.’

‘I think you’re halfway there,’ said Ravenor. ‘That’s good reasoning, but you’re not taking it far enough. I agree the ocean is part of it, functioning as a resonating medium, but I think the real secret is the moon itself.’

‘Utochre?’

‘Yes. How often do we find crystals or crystalline materials employed in divination and prediction? Sensing crystals, scrying crystals, crystals used to refract and focus psy-impulses?’

‘Crystal balls?’

‘Exactly. The technique and belief is as old as man, and we’re not the only species to appreciate the method.’

‘The eldar?’

‘Precisely – the eldar. Mineral resonance. Let’s face it, it wouldn’t be wildly incorrect to define wraithbone as an organic gemstone. This moon is infamously rich in a myriad different forms of crystal deposit. The Wych House—’

‘-uses Utochre as a gigantic crystal ball,’ Carl said with a grin. ‘Am I close?’

‘I don’t know. If you are, it’s a crude analogy, but those are the lines I was thinking along.’

Carl looked pleased with himself.

‘You were almost there ahead of me that time, interrogator. I soon won’t be able to teach you anything.’

‘The stuff I know,’ Carl chuckled.

The fluttering whispers suddenly stopped. The abrupt silence was a little unnerving. With a shudder, the Wych House adjusted its footing.

‘The House is ready,’ said one of the hooded figures.

‘Step up onto this level,’ instructed another. Ravenor guided his chair up over the lower steps onto the raised walkway, and his companions followed obediently until they all stood, waiting, beside the housekeepers.

They heard a rapid series of metal clanks and the whine of hydraulics. Slowly, ponderously, a broad, circular platform descended from the domed roof space on heavy telescopic stanchions. The platform fitted concentrically over the lower floor space but was several metres smaller in diameter. It lowered until it was precisely as far above the level of the raised walkway as the walkway was above the lower floor, creating a third tier to the chamber. The edge of the circular platform met the top of the steps jutting up and out from the raised circuit, and locked in place with a thump of mag-bolts. There was enough headroom beneath it for a man to descend to the lower floor space and walk around without ducking.

The circular platform was a thick and pitted disc of iron or steel with the six elevator stanchions, each one currently at full extension, rising like columns at regular intervals around its rim. Above it, black girders and the

beams of the dome space slowly became illuminated by the gradually intensifying ghost glare of a dozen photo-lumin lamps.

The open space of the platform was empty apart from a single object: a half-open door, held upright in the centre of the platform by its frame. The door was old and made of wood, a very ordinary old door in a very ordinary frame.

They all stared at it for a moment. Above them, the House altered its foothold once again, and the motion caused the old door to swing back and forth in its frame slightly, as if blown by a breeze. It thumped to, and then swung open a hand's breadth ajar. 'I give in, what is it?' asked Nayl.

'A door,' replied Angharad, who, Ravenor had found, could always be relied upon for a prosaic answer. 'A door,' Carl echoed. 'Could it be what I think it is?' 'It rather depends on what you think it is, Carl,' Ravenor replied. The housekeepers moved past them in procession, carrying lamps up the steps onto the door platform and arranging them around the edges of the disc. Ravenor lifted up onto the platform too and approached the door. The others slowly followed him.

'A propylaeum tripartite?' Thonius ventured, speaking in hushed tones. 'A... tri-portal?'

'That was my thought,' Ravenor said. 'Again, your deduction is excellent. As is your knowledge of abstruse lore and esoterica. Where have you come across the concept?'

Carl shrugged. 'I remember finding references to the idea in study, years ago. I can't... I can't remember the reference.'

'Sarnique's *Codex Atrox*,' Ballack said quietly, 'and also *The Ochre Book*.' He looked around at Ravenor and Thonius. 'Access to such works is restricted but, like Carl, I have made use of my interrogator status for the purpose of study. Three years ago, working with Inquisitor Fenx on Mirepoix, we were called to investigate a cult, which, it was claimed, operated a functional propylaeum tripartite. It proved to be a hoax, but I did my research. This design matches the woodcuts in Sarnique's work.'

'Sarnique,' Thonius nodded, 'that's the fellow.'

‘Are we supposed to believe this is a genuine tri-portal?’ Ballack asked, walking around to the far side of the door frame so they could see him through the half-open door.

‘Anyone fancy, I dunno,’ Nayl murmured, ‘telling me what you’re talking about?’

‘Carl? Ballack?’ Ravenor asked.

Thonius took a step forward until he was on the opposite side of the door to Ballack. He approached it gingerly. The door thumped slightly and loosely in its frame, as if caught by a persistent breeze.

‘A propylaeum tripartite,’ Carl said.

‘You keep saying that,’ Nayl chided.

‘A three-way door,’ Carl Thonius corrected with a disdainful look at the heavy bounty-man. ‘A mythical device of augury and divination. Its manner of function has never been explained, not even in psionic terms, though it may simply be a totem for psychic focus. An elaborate fetish.’

‘How does it work?’ asked Kys. ‘I mean... in what way does it work?’

‘It has one side here,’ said Thonius.

‘And a second here,’ said Ballack, from the other side of the door. ‘But if one passes through the door...’ Ballack hesitated. Neither he nor Thonius showed any willingness to perform that act. ‘Well, Kys, it is said that one finds a third side. A third way. The door transports the subject to another location in space-time entirely, a site where the answer to a specific question of augury may be learned.’

‘A portal?’ asked Kys.

Ballack shrugged.

‘Yes, a portal,’ said Ravenor. ‘The door is said to be able to convey a subject elsewhere. In fact, to more than one place, depending on the sequence of use and the complexity of the answer sought after.’

He swung his chair away from the door. The others grouped around him. ‘I wasn’t expecting this,’ Ravenor said, ‘which was foolish of me. Unless it proved to be fraudulent, the Wych House was always going to contain a

truly dark secret. This is what we came all this way to find. I just don't like the idea of using it.'

'Me neither,' said Thonius.

'I'm still struggling with the basic concept,' Nayl admitted.

'It's just an old wooden door,' Angharad repeated, leadenly.

'We have to use it.'

They all turned to regard Kys. She was watching the housekeepers set out the fluttering lamps and tapers around the rim of the platform.

'We've come all this way, like you said. We've broken every rule we care about. We knew we would be tampering with the dark, the heretical. I don't like this one bit, but we're in it now. We're committed.'

'What are you suggesting?' Thonius asked her.

'What are you suggesting?' Kys snapped back. 'Do we turn away? Go home? Give up? If we were going to do that, Throne help me, we should have done it months ago. We've come too far to get squeamish now.'

+You're right, Patience. Thank you for being the voice of reason.+

+I don't feel very reasonable.+

'We're doing this,' Ravenor said. 'Well, some of us are. I won't risk the entire group. I need to leave someone here to cover our backs.'

'That's assuming,' said Angharad archly, 'that this isn't just an old wooden door flapping in the breeze.'

'Assuming that it isn't,' said Ravenor. 'Perhaps you'd like to come with me and find out? Ballack, Carl you too, please. Harlon, you and Patience stay put and keep watch over this flapping door.'

A dark look crossed Nayl's face. He glanced at the swordswoman. 'No, I —' he began. He stopped short.

+She'll be fine with me, Harlon, I promise. I'll take care of her. Besides, she can take care of herself. And her mind is wonderfully strong, marvellously resilient. There is a great deal of unworldliness she can withstand.+

Nayl glowered. 'But—'

+I need your strength here. I need Kys here too, as a psychic link. Don't argue, Nayl.+

'I'd never argue with you.'

+Harlon, I know how much you care about the Carthaen. I know everything. I will protect her.+

Nayl nodded, grudgingly. He caught Angharad's eye and made the fist-to-sternum punch salute of the clans. She returned it.

Ravenor caught Kys's mind intimately.+I'll try casting to you.+

+I'll be listening for you.+

+Keep us grounded, Patience.+

+I will.+

THE ENTIRE RIM of the platform was by then flickering with candles and lamps. More lamps had been brought out onto the raised walkway too. The theatre chamber's overhead lights dimmed to a slight glimmer.

The flutter of whispering voices swirled around them once more, for the first time in half an hour. The moment they ceased, the door slammed shut tight with a loud bang, and they heard the ancient lock turn.

'The House is ready for you,' said one of the housekeepers.

'The door is ready to be unlocked,' said another. They stood in a ragged circle around Ravenor's team on the disc.

'Who has the right key?' asked Ravenor.

Another chilling murmur of whispers.

One of the housekeepers stepped forward, taking hold of the key it wore around its neck.

'I do,' the housekeeper said. The other housekeepers muttered softly, as if congratulating the chosen one.

'Who goes and who stays?' asked another of the hooded figures.

'I'm staying,' replied Kys.

'Me too,' Nayl grunted. The housekeeper motioned for them to follow. All but the chosen housekeeper processed slowly off the upper platform

onto the walkway below. Kys walked after them. She paused and looked back.

‘The Emperor protects,’ she called out.

+Not this time, I’m afraid.+

‘Then you protect, Gideon,’ she said. She turned and walked down the steps.

Nayl moved to go after her. He stopped, and then strode deliberately back to Angharad and kissed her roughly on the lips. ‘Damn it,’ he growled. ‘I want to see you all again alive. Even you, Thonius.’

‘I’ll be counting the minutes, dear heart.’ Carl grinned back.

Nayl turned and plodded across the platform towards the steps.

He thumped down them and stood beside Kys, amongst the silent housekeepers, gazing up onto the door platform.

‘So, you and the warrior woman.’ Kys whispered.

‘Shut it.’

‘How long has that been going on?’

‘Two words, Kys. Shut the frig up.’

‘My lips are sealed,’ she smirked. ‘Unlike yours. Or hers.’

He glared at her. She pointed up at the platform. ‘You’re missing the show,’ she told him.

She turned to watch. Despite her smile, she had started to pray.

‘ARE YOU CONTENT to begin?’ asked the housekeeper beside the door.

‘Oh, I can’t wait,’ said Thonius. Angharad looked bored. Ballack rested his good hand on the grip of his holstered weapon.

‘We are content,’ Ravenor replied.

The housekeeper removed the key from around its neck and slid it into the door’s ancient lock. The key turned with a loud, unlubricated clack.

The door opened.

Thonius snorted. Through the open frame, they could see the other side of the platform disc, the uninterrupted ring of the flickering lamps and

tapers.

‘I’m really impressed so far,’ Thonius remarked.

+Quiet!+

‘This way,’ the housekeeper instructed, ushering them through the open doorway.

They stepped forward.

The door slammed behind them and locked itself.

NAYL TURNED TO stare at Kys. She was wide-eyed, startled, terrified.

‘Holy living shit,’ Nayl said. ‘Did you see?’

‘I saw,’ said Kys.

They’d watched their comrades and the chosen housekeeper step through the door, watched the door slam.

Now there was nothing at all on the platform except the closed and locked door.



TWELVE

‘WHAT WAS THAT?’ Plyton asked, getting up suddenly.

‘What was what?’ asked Lucic. He had been playing jacks on his coat spread out across the grille deck of the dock.

‘Like a door,’ Plyton replied, raising her shotgun. ‘Like a door slamming somewhere.’

‘The House is old, and full of noises,’ the scrawny prospector remarked. ‘Get used to it.’

She ignored him, walked the length of the dock to the hatchway and shone her lamp pack up the service tunnel. Nothing stirred. She opened her link.

‘Checking in,’ she called.

‘Nothing to report,’ the pilot servitor crackled back from the docked underboat. She retraced her steps through the spooky shadows of the corroded machinery. The dock lights flickered slightly as the House took another step. Chains rocked and swung.

Lucic was sitting where she’d left him.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked sharply.

‘Playing jacks,’ he replied.

‘You were doing something with your coat!’ she snapped, aiming the shotgun.

‘Yes, Maud. I was playing jacks on my coat!’ He gazed at her with his bulging, thyroid eyes, his skinny face comically honest.

‘All right then,’ she said, lowering her weapon and sitting back down on a rusting coil winder. ‘You’re awful jumpy, Maud,’ Lucic observed. ‘Don’t talk to me.’

I AM STRUCK by the distinct impression that Carl is about to say, ‘I told you this was a waste of time.’

‘I told you this—’ he begins. His voice fails him. Like all of us, he is looking around, dumbstruck, astonished.

I cannot believe it either. I reach out, with almost instinctive alarm, and sweep with my mind.

This is no lie. Or, if it is a lie, it is a lie impervious to the scrutiny of even a mind like mine.

We are no longer aboard the Wych House. We are no longer on Utochre or, I’ll wager, in the Cyto system, or even in the Helican sub-sector. My chair’s internal horolog has just failed, erased, and restarted. A condition of portal transit, perhaps, or an indication we are no longer even in the same year as the one we left.

It is stunning and awful and fundamentally disconcerting. I look at Ballack, open-mouthed, gazing into the distance; at Carl, bending down to touch the hot, dry dust; at Angharad, narrowing her eyes and slowly drawing her Carthaen steel. Only the housekeeper, holding onto its wretched key, seems unperturbed. The hot wind flaps the housekeeper’s dark robes.

‘Everybody all right?’ I ask.

We are standing in a sweltering dust bowl of gritty red dunes, surrounded by an ominous ring of jagged, black volcanic outcrops. A strong desert wind drives the dust up at us, and I hear it pattering off the shell of my chair. The sky is a red haze of sickly light and whorled cloud banks. There is a star, flaring and wounded, blood-red like a gunshot wound to the sky.

I have no idea where we are.

I rotate my chair slowly, pict recording every millimetre of our surroundings on my chair’s internal recorders. I use the chair’s systems to sample the dust, the regolith and the air, and ping out with my internal auspex. This is a dead place. The air temperature is soaring and the rocks around us radiate hellish heat.

This is real. This isn't a dream, or a vision, or an auto-séance trance. This is real, and I have to get used to that fact fast or lose my sanity.

The door is behind me, standing anachronistically in the middle of nowhere, tall and firm and closed tight. I watch Ballack move around it in a circle. He tries the handle, and finds it locked.

'Master—' he says to me. He has seldom called me that. He must be very afraid.

I circle the door myself, my chair's impellers gusting up eddies of dust. I go right around it. It is as solid and real as the new world around us. Shut tight, one side baking in the alien sun's glare, the other dark in shadow. The door itself casts a long, oblong shadow across the red dust.

'Oh, Thronem' Carl whines.

'I would like to know where...' Angharad says, her sword in her hand. 'I would like to know exactly... I mean... where...?'

+Be calm.+

'I want to know where we are!' Angharad snarls, glancing at the housekeeper.

+Calm!+

I send a wave of reassurance into her, and stop her in her tracks before she has the housekeeper by the throat.

'Is this the place?' I ask. 'Is this the place where I find my answer?'

'Well, I don't see Molotch anywhere around, so I'm guessing no,' Carl whines.

'It won't be that simple,' I tell him. 'Will it, housekeeper?'

'This is just the first step,' the housekeeper replies in that oh-so androgynous way they have. 'The first step. Your question was convoluted. The door will have to open several times, I believe.'

'Then why are we here?' Carl demands.

+Calm!+ I send again, to Carl this time.

'This is a place the House wanted to show you. I don't know why,' the housekeeper says. 'I am not told such things. It is not my function.'

‘What happens now?’ Ballack asks. Of all of them, he has kept his head the best.

‘We wait,’ says our hooded guide.

‘I don’t want to wait,’ Angharad says quickly. ‘I don’t want to stay here. Something’s coming.’

‘I sense nothing,’ I say, checking.

‘I see nothing,’ adds Ballack.

‘Something’s coming,’ Angharad insists, ‘something bad. Evisorex can taste it.’ The long steel is twitching in her hands. It is taking her trained double grip to contain it.

‘Over that ridge,’ she says. I regard the ridge she has indicated, a long, low line of black basalt rising from the dunes like rotted teeth from a gum. I sense nothing, but there seems to be a gathering pall of dust closing in behind the wild outcrop.

‘For Throne’s sake!’ Carl snaps. ‘I want to get out of here! Can we get out of here? Please?’

‘Calm down and—’

Then I feel it. I feel what they’re all feeling: doom, a creeping, penetrating sense of doom and fear, as intolerable as the pervasive red light. It pulls at my mind, dark, like a shadow in the warp.

‘I don’t like this,’ says Ballack.

‘Housekeeper?’

‘We must wait for the door,’ the housekeeper replies.

‘Damn the door! Damn the frigging door!’ Carl cries. He throws himself at it, banging his hands against the wood and rattling the handle with futile effort. ‘Oh, Throne, master!’

He races around to the other side and tries again. ‘Let us back! Let us through!’

‘Stop it, Carl. Stop it now.’

But Carl Thonius won’t stop it. The fear has gripped him. He hammers and hammer and hammers—

IN THE THEATRE chamber, still and quiet, Kys glanced at Nayl. 'Did you hear that?' she asked.

They both looked at the door.

'Nothing. Just the House settling again.'

'No,' she said. 'Didn't you hear the banging? Like someone thumping on the other side of the door?'

'No,' he replied, without confidence. As they watched, the door's handle rotated to and fro, as if someone, somewhere, was trying to open it.

'Shit!' said Nayl, stepping forward. Kys stopped him.

'There's nothing we can do except wait,' she told him.

+CARL!+

Ravenor's command pulled him back from the door. He was sweating profusely from the overwhelming heat and the fear. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Sorry.'

'Housekeeper?' Ravenor asked.

The housekeeper waited a moment or two longer, and then stepped forward and fitted the key back into the lock.

It turned, and the door reopened.

'This way,' the housekeeper said.

They hurried through the doorway and let it slam shut behind them. Ravenor heard it lock again.

Their body sweat turned clammy on their backs in an instant. Even more than before, they were overwhelmed by the sensation of being somewhere utterly and completely else. Not just because of the light and temperature conditions, but because of the infinitesimally altered pull of gravity, the imperceptible change of air pressure, the smell, the pheromone of the place.

Ballack drew his weapon. He glanced around. They were inside a stone cloister of Imperial Gothic construction. It was old, and eroded by time and weather. They could all hear the bash of ocean breakers striking an

invisible shore nearby. It was dark, night. Stars were out in the clear black sky.

‘Master?’ Thonius whispered.

Ravenor was trying to reset his chair’s internal horolog. Its jumping readings were nonsense.

‘Master!’

Ravenor turned his perception outwards and scanned the location. ‘I know this,’ he said.

‘The door is locked,’ announced Angharad. The door stood behind them in the dim cloister, strange and out of place. ‘It’s locked from either side,’ she added, having tried both.

‘Those stars,’ Ravenor said.

Carl looked up. ‘I... I don’t know them.’

‘But we should,’ said Ravenor. ‘I’m checking them against my data coils, trying to find a match. Wait, wait...’

‘We’re in the Ordo Malleus chapter house on Gudrun,’ said Ballack. He turned to look at them. ‘I wish I could claim some clever insight, sir, but it’s written here on the wall.’

Ballack showed them the ancient, faded plaque.

‘But this is a ruin,’ said Thonius.

They moved out along the cloister and into the crumbling, stunted wreckage of the chapter house that spread out across an overgrown headland. The place had been reduced to this state many years before. Weeds and climbing plants festooned the tumbled stones, twitching fretfully in the night wind off the sea.

‘I was here a year ago!’ Ballack cried. ‘It was intact, I swear, it was intact and—’

‘This isn’t a year ago, or a year hence,’ Ravenor said. ‘I don’t know when we are. I think the door is showing us some important consequence of fate. I believe we are in our own future.’

‘Look—’ said Angharad. Across the bay, where the night sea crashed relentlessly against a broken shore, they could see the desolate, empty silhouette of a great city.

It had been dead for many years.

‘Great Throne of Terra,’ Ravenor murmured. ‘That’s Dorsay.’

He rotated his chair to face the housekeeper. ‘Take us back through the door,’ he said.

‘The door is not ready.’

‘Take us back through the door! Now!’

THE DOOR OPENED and closed behind them again, thanks to the housekeeper’s key.

A summer evening waited on the other side. The long, low rake of a recently harvested field stretched down in the easy light towards a bank of hedges, with trees beyond. A slowly fading sky above was ribboned with white clouds that were just taking on the colours of dusk.

A hundred metres away down the field, a plain wooden chair sat forlorn amongst the hewn, dry strands of the crop.

Birds sang, twittering overhead in the twilight and chasing in the hedgerows. A few early stars had come out on the depth of the sky.

A lone figure was toiling up the field towards the chair.

Ravenor turned his own chair and regarded his companions. They stood in front of the locked door, which rose improbably from the field crest behind them.

‘Stay here,’ Ravenor instructed.

‘But—’ Ballack began.

‘Stay here and do nothing unless I signal.’

He coasted away across the dead stubble and followed the slope of the field down towards the lonely wooden seat. The figure was approaching, walking up into the twilight air with confidence and effort.

Ravenor approached the waiting chair. He stopped short ten metres away. The residue of the harvested crop, the remaining stalks, had been carefully raked and twisted into a circle around the wooden chair. The circle was five metres in diameter, with the wooden seat at its dead centre. Ravenor recognised the complex weaving and design of the circle's rim.

He hovered outside it, waiting, as the figure approached up the slope.

The figure arrived, stepped into the corn circle, and sat down on the chair. He was breathing hard. The legs of the old wooden chair rested unevenly in the loose soil, and set him at an angle.

‘Well, hello,’ the man on the chair said at last, dabbing at his brow with a handkerchief. He was a portly man in late middle age, dressed in a high-buttoned, green silk suit. His thick dark hair and beard were perfectly groomed. ‘I was wondering when you’d get here. You are Gideon Ravenor, aren’t you? Of course you are. So we meet, finally, face to face.’

He leaned forward. ‘Uh, you do know who I am?’

‘Yes,’ said Ravenor.

‘Excellent!’ replied Orfeo Culzean. ‘So, let’s talk.’



THIRTEEN

MAUD PLYTON WAS pacing. Her footsteps rang up and down the docking pool's deck. Lucic watched her with some amusement.

She looked at her link wistfully, but for the umpteenth time decided she shouldn't disturb whatever was taking place in the upper chambers of the House.

She was slipping the link back in her coat pocket when she heard a muffled sound.

'What was that?' she demanded, turning to look at Lucic.

'What was what?' he grinned at her.

'I heard a noise.'

'This again? Maud, come on! You're so jumpy. You're getting quite paranoid.'

Plyton stepped towards him and brought the heavy combat shotgun up. 'I heard a noise,' she hissed, 'the trill-tone of a link.'

'You're imagining it.'

'Get up and back away,' she told him. Lucic rose, and took a few steps backwards down the dock. He left his coat spread out on the decking, the loose jack pieces scattered across it.

Keeping her eyes on Lucic, her gun raised in her right hand, she stooped and lifted the coat by the collar and threw it over on the decking.

'Hey!' Lucic cried. The jack pieces tumbled away across the deck, and most fell through the grille into the water below.

Kneeling, Plyton patted down the empty coat with her left hand, feeling into the pockets, her eyes never leaving the prospector.

'Stuff your "hey",' she said. Her left hand emerged from a deep pocket holding a worn, old link device. 'You lying bastard.'

‘Oh, come on,’ Lucic said. ‘Since when was it against the rules to own a link?’

‘Who were you talking to? Who were you signalling?’

Lucic didn’t reply. His meagre mouth became tight and pinched below his blade of a nose. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, Maud.’ He looked down at the deck.

‘Who was it, Lucic?’

He looked up at her again, a broad smile slowly extending across his face.

Without turning, she knew why. She went cold. She felt the muzzle of a weapon press against the back of her head.

‘Like I keep saying,’ said Lucic, stepping forward and taking the shotgun from her, ‘out here, a man needs all the friends he can get.’

NAYL TOOK A strip of dry jerky from his pocket and tore off a chunk with his teeth. He offered the fistful of food to Kys. She shook her head.

‘Waiting makes me hungry,’ he said.

The door had been silent for over an hour. Nayl and Kys idled on the raised walkway, sometimes walking up onto the top platform to take a closer look at the door. The housekeepers had all remained as still as statues.

‘So, you and Angharad?’ Kys asked.

‘It’s a private thing.’

‘A private thing for how long?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Will it matter to Gideon?’

Nayl scowled. ‘I don’t want to hurt him, but it’s none of his business.’

‘You must have known it would matter to him, or you wouldn’t have hidden it.’

‘Shut up, Kys. You don’t know anything.’

‘You know I do.’ She paused suddenly and looked away. ‘Nayl—’

He was already reaching for his sidearm, but it was too late.

The heavy hatches around the theatre chamber's walls slammed open and figures surged in onto the raised walkway: a dozen grizzled, hard-bodied men in grubby combat armour and fur-trimmed hostile environment suits. They aimed their lascarbines and shotguns with a professional confidence that matched their stony expressions.

Nayl and Kys froze and slowly raised their hands. There was no cover, no room to resist. One of the men pushed the barrel of his carbine into Nayl's face while he reached over and confiscated the bounty hunter's sidearm.

'Who are you?' asked Nayl. None of them answered. Two of them were herding the housekeepers into a tight huddle. Meek, the housekeepers made no sound or any gesture of resistance.

'Watch the woman,' a voice echoed out across the chamber. Nayl and Kys turned. A large figure was walking around the circuit towards them, accompanied by two more hired guns. His carapace armour gleamed like mother of pearl in the lamp light. His head was a mass of livid scar tissue, with a bleached stripe of hair across his scalp. He held a psy-scanner in one gauntleted hand.

'She's telekinetic,' he said. He glared at Kys, and waved the scanner at her. 'One hint of psy, I'll know it, and you'll be dead.'

'Lucius frigging Worna,' Nayl growled.

The massive bounty hunter regarded Nayl. 'Long time, Nayl,' he said. 'I see you've fallen on hard times, scrabbling for dung work like this. Working for the Throne, brother. Shit, I'm disappointed in you. Gives our kind a bad name.'

'You do that all by yourself,' Nayl replied.

Kys stared at Lucius Worna. This was the callous monster who had tortured and mutilated Sholto Unwerth. The last they'd heard of him, he'd been working for the opposition. She had no doubt he still was, and that meant—

'What happens?' Nayl asked.

'Oh, it's happened already,' Worna replied. 'You tried a little gambit, but we outplayed you. We've won. You've lost. End of story.'



FOURTEEN

‘SO, THIS IS a trap.’

Orfeo Culzean gestured around himself with both hands, indicating both the harvested field and the twilight sky. ‘This? No, this is not a trap. This is a conversation.’

‘But the Wych House, the three-way door... that was a trap,’ Ravenor said.

Culzean chuckled. ‘Trap this, trap that, trap, trap, trap! I suppose it must be the inquisitor in you that makes you so very suspicious all the time, Gideon. May I call you Gideon, incidentally?’

‘You may not. I watch for traps all the time because Zygmunt Molotch is supremely gifted at setting them, and he’s caught me more than once before.’

Culzean thought about that. ‘Well,’ he said gently, ‘if it is a trap, it would be safe to conclude you’re not getting any better at spotting them, are you?’

‘I’ve never underestimated Molotch’s guile,’ Ravenor replied. ‘The only thing I seem to keep underestimating is his talent for coming back from the dead.’ He scanned around gently. On his seat in the warded ring of corn, Culzean was a blank. There were human life signs in the woods behind him, support, no doubt, but too far away to be an immediate threat. Thonius, Ballack and Angharad remained at the top of the hilly field, watching from beside the door.

‘Where is Molotch?’ Ravenor asked. ‘Is he too afraid to face me himself?’

‘Where is Molotch? That’s the question, isn’t it. The big question, the one you came to Utochre to answer. I think the door’s done a splendid job of

answering you. It's brought you here. Molotch is close by, but I am much better at this kind of negotiation. I don't know how much you know about me?'

'Enough not to underestimate you either. But you're not like Molotch. You're a different breed of evil altogether. A facilitator. A mercenary. A prostitute—'

'Well, let's not bandy semantics, shall we?' Culzean frowned. 'This should be amicable. A conversation between peers.'

Birds sang high in the darkening sky above them. Their songs seemed painfully innocent to Ravenor.

'You have arranged all this so we can talk?' Ravenor asked.

'No, actually,' replied Culzean. He settled back. 'It's quite the most curious thing. It arranged itself. Oh, I had to make a few judicious improvements and alterations so it would all run smoothly, but generally, this just happened.' His eyes sparkled with enthusiastic cunning. 'That's just amazing, isn't it? That's why I decided we had to talk.'

'So talk.'

Culzean nodded and brushed corn chaff off the hem of his jacket. 'To business then. I'll keep it simple. You have been chasing Zygmunt Molotch for a long time, and with due cause, I will admit. If I was an Imperial inquisitor – perish the thought! – I would have made it my life's work to hunt him down too. The pair of you dance and dance around each other, jabbing and sparring, daring and thwarting. You've done it for years. You'll be doing it forever, I believe, unless someone intervenes and brings matters to a head.'

'Is that someone you?'

'In part. Working on Zygmunt's behalf, I have discovered some strange facts, Gideon. I found out things I don't think either of you are aware of.'

'Such as?'

'The pair of you are bound by destiny. Bound by a single, shared destiny.'

'That's merely a fanciful and melodramatic way of describing my ongoing prosecution of the heretic Zygmunt Molotch. If that's the best you

can—’

‘Whoa, whoa!’ Culzean said, raising a hand. ‘Settle down. I mean it literally, as it happens. Right at the start, the first time you met, something happened that spliced you together in a grand, cosmic design.’

‘And what is that design?’

‘Ah, that’s why I wanted to talk to you.’

‘This is just nonsense. Make your play if you’re going to. My people are ready,’ Ravenor cast out a simple command and, on the crest of the hill behind him, his three companions drew their weapons.

‘I don’t want to fight you,’ said Culzean. ‘That’s the point. All the time we’re fighting each other we’re missing what’s really important. And what’s really important is Slyte.’

Ravenor paused. ‘You have two minutes, Culzean.’

Culzean licked his lips and smiled. ‘You came all the way to Utochre because you believed it was the only way you’d find out where Zygmunt was hiding. A good plan. A very good plan, in fact, because Zygmunt had the very same idea. When we made our exit from Tancred, Zygmunt decided that the only way he could ever be safe from you, truly safe, was to consult the future and find out your part in it. He wanted coherence too. Isn’t that funny? Both of you deciding to take precisely the same course of action?’

He leaned forward and tapped an index finger against his temple. ‘It’s because you think the same way. Bound in destiny, remember?’

Ravenor didn’t reply.

‘We arrived at Utochre about three weeks ahead of you. I made the appropriate arrangements, and secured us a consultation at the Wych House. And what was the first thing we found out when the door opened? That you were coming to the Wych House too, hell-bent on the same scheme. That took me aback, I can tell you. Zygmunt, for his part, was delighted. He was all for setting a final and very nasty trap for you. And we’ve established his penchant for traps already. But I talked him out of it. The whole thing fascinated me, piqued my facilitator’s mind. I think along

different lines to Zygmunt, you see. We perceive different patterns, which is why we complement each other. Zygmunt saw it all as moves in a great game, you and he as pieces on a regicide board, one stratagem out stepping the next, blah bla-blah. But I was scared.'

'Scared?'

'Of the implications. There are coincidences and there are coincidences. A great deal can be dismissed on the basis of your shared history and experiences. You have similar knowledge, similar talents and, although it's a blood rivalry, you walk in similarly dark places. Both of you simultaneously decide to come to the Wych House? I can accept that. Coincidence. But what brought you both to Eustis Majoris? What brought you to the other worlds where you've clashed?'

'We're antagonists, Culzean. I'm hunting him. It's not hard to grasp.'

'What about Tancred? Of all the places in the sector, you tracked him to Tancred. We left no trail that you could have followed. What brought you there? A hunch?'

Again, Ravenor didn't answer.

'I'm right, aren't I?' smiled Culzean. He stroked his beard. 'A hunch. A hunch here, a little intuition there, a handful of happenstance and accident. Doesn't it scare you too, just a little bit?'

'What's your explanation? And don't say shared destiny.'

'This is what I decided to find out. I sat down with Zygmunt and interviewed him over a period of days. He'd told me of your past encounters already, but I wanted to hear them from him again, every last detail. He kindly and patiently told me everything, and that's when I saw it. Clear as day. The way the two of you had been bound.'

He rose to his feet and walked around the wooden chair, staying within the corn ring. 'You have been bound by the forces of the warp, Gideon, bound together to accomplish a great task. Neither of you realises you're being used. Left to your own devices, I doubt either of you would have ever realised it. Apart, perhaps, for one brief, gurgling moment of insight as death claimed you. The warp has chosen you, selected you both

carefully, and set you about its work. Without realising it, as you wage your sporadic bloody squabble down the years, you are acting as facilitators. As midwives.’ ‘For Slyte,’ Ravenor said.

Culzean clapped his hands. ‘Sharp as a new crown! I knew I wouldn’t be disappointed in you, Gideon. Yes, for Slyte. The Ruinous Powers want Slyte to be born. Don’t ask me why, because they don’t copy me on their meetings—’ Culzean snorted at his own words. ‘But you can bet it’s going to be bloody horrible.’

‘The birth of Slyte was predicted,’ said Ravenor uneasily. ‘The Fraternity predicted it. You were there, Culzean. The hour has passed. The prophesy was unfulfilled.’

‘Was it? Was it really?’ Culzean looked at Ravenor as if he knew something. ‘Or has it already happened? Or... look at it this way, Gideon. The birthing of a daemon in our reality is likely to be a long and protracted labour. There will be complications. If, let’s agree for a moment, you and Zygmunt have been obliviously working towards this end since the first day you met, then the birth pangs have lasted, what, sixty years already?’ ‘Sixty-six, if you’re right.’

‘Not an easy birth,’ Culzean mused, ‘not an easy birth at all.’ ‘How are you suggesting the Ruinous Powers bound us, Culzean? Explain how I could have been used by the Archenemy for so long without realising it? I am no one’s pawn.’

‘Please, no pawn ever realises he or she is a pawn,’ said Culzean. ‘And look at you. You’ve broken from the ordos, gone rogue, and come to Utochre hunting heretical divination. You’re not exactly pure.’ ‘How did the warp bind us?’ Ravenor repeated.

Culzean waved his hands in frustration. ‘At your first meeting, Sleef Outworld. I haven’t got time to fill in all the blanks for you, Gideon. You’re smart. You figure it out. We’ve got more important things to consider right here.’ ‘Like?’

‘Like the very purpose of this meeting.’ He paused. ‘I’m proposing a truce. A pooling of resources towards a common goal.’

‘A truce? That’s a spectacularly unlikely notion, Culzean. In fact, it sounds to me very much like the groundwork of one of Molotch’s elaborate traps.’

‘If we wanted you dead,’ said Culzean, ‘you’d have been dead by now. We’ve kept you alive because there’s a good chance you and Zygmunt need each other. You need to come together to defy the Ruinous Powers and stop Slyte.’

Ravenor rolled his chair back a little way. ‘Tell me, Culzean, why would a fiend like Molotch even want to stop Slyte? It sounds like the sort of thing he would ordinarily be working his fingers to the bone to accomplish.’

Culzean sat down again. ‘You don’t really understand us, do you, Gideon? You don’t really understand our beliefs and our ambitions. We’re just evil, an evil to be stopped. And all evil is the same to you. It carries the same weight... me, Zygmunt, Slyte. You’re so blinkered.’ He stared at Ravenor intently. ‘You’ve been through the door, Gideon. I’ll wager it showed you a future or two. Pleasant?’

‘Inconclusive. But no, not pleasant.’

‘I know what Zygmunt and I saw when we went through the door. A galaxy in flames. An age of apocalypse. Daemon time. No Imperium except a burning shell populated by the last dying dregs of mankind. You don’t want that, I know you don’t. You’ve spent your life defending society against just such a doom. We don’t want it either. Our ambitions are wildly different to yours, Gideon, and in definite conflict. But Zygmunt and I can only flourish, prosper and achieve our own goals so long as the Imperium persists. The Imperium is our playground, mankind our instrument. We weave our schemes through the complex fabric of Imperial life, to benefit ourselves. I’m not pretending you’d like what we want from our lives, but it would be nothing compared to Daemon time. Slyte must be stopped. The alternative is too awful for any of us to contemplate.’

‘A truce.’ Ravenor said. ‘Molotch and I, working together, to defy the bond and destroy Slyte? This is what you’re proposing?’

Culzean nodded. 'If you agree, Gideon, I'll send you back through the door to Utochre. I'll arrange for a message to be sent to you at Berynth, giving you this location. This world where we're sitting now. You bring your people here, and we start to plan in earnest.'

'If I refuse?'

'Then you'll never know where here is, and we'll have to manage on our own. The Imperium may suffer. If you refuse, go back through the door and we'll say goodbye.'

There was a long pause, stirred only by the evening breeze and the twitter of hedgerow birds.

'Goodbye,' said Ravenor. He turned his chair around and began to glide back up the hill.

'I'm disappointed!' Culzean called after him. 'Truly, I am! You're making a mistake!'

Ravenor ignored him. He re-joined his companions at the top of the slope.

'What's going on?' asked Thonius.

'Who was that man?' asked Angharad.

'We're leaving,' Ravenor said. 'Open the door, housekeeper.'

The housekeeper placed the key in the door's old lock.

They looked back down the field for a moment. In the dusk, Orfeo Culzean was still sitting on his chair in the corn ring, watching them. He raised his right hand to his lips and blew them a kiss.

'I don't like this,' Thonius said.

'You haven't liked much of anything so far,' Ballack snapped.

'Open the door,' Ravenor repeated.

The door creaked open. They saw the evening fields beyond the door frame, the first stars now bright in the violet sky.

They stepped through.



FIFTEEN

THE DRIPPING, STINKING bowels of an underhive surrounded them.

It was gloomy and oppressively muggy. Water – probably not rainwater – pattered down on them from high above, down the sheer ravine depths of the stack foundations. High above, a thousand metres up, tiny moving dots showed the criss-cross of upper level air traffic buzzing between the hive towers.

They heard running footsteps approaching down a nearby alley, a caterwauling laugh that sounded slightly insane.

‘This isn’t right,’ Thonius said, ‘not right at all.’ He looked at the housekeeper. ‘Why aren’t we in the right place?’

‘The route back is often not the same as the route there,’ the housekeeper said blandly. ‘The door chooses.’

‘How many steps until we’re back at the Wych House?’ asked Ballack firmly.

‘The door chooses. It’s not my function,’ the housekeeper replied.

‘Open the door again,’ said Ravenor.

The footsteps and laughter were getting closer.

‘Whoever is approaching,’ said Angharad, ‘they’re out of their minds on some substance. I can smell it on their sweat.’

‘You can smell anything above this general stink?’ asked Thonius.

Angharad ignored him and looked at Ravenor. ‘They will be violent. There will be violence.’

‘Open the door,’ Ravenor repeated.

The housekeeper tried the key. It refused to turn. ‘The door is not ready to be opened again.’

‘Open the door.’

‘We must wait until it is ready,’ the housekeeper said.

Thonius flinched as shots banged off loudly in a stack-sink nearby. They heard the distinct whine of a hard round spanking off stone. More laughter, shouts. A scream.

‘Gangs,’ said Ballack. He raised his laspistol and took a careful aim at the alleyway end, ‘pharmed up and juicing for an argument. First head around that wall gets a new nostril.’ There were more shots, closer now, and more screaming laughter. Angharad took up a place beside Ballack. ‘Don’t shoot them all,’ she told him, ‘Evisorex thirsts.’

‘You realise I wouldn’t be here to have all this fun if it wasn’t for you,’ Ballack said sarcastically. ‘You can thank me later,’ she replied. ‘Come on,’ said Thonius. ‘The door?’ The housekeeper tried the key. It turned.

RED LIGHT, HOT wind, red dust.

‘Damn,’ said Ballack, raising his arm to shield his eyes from the gritty wind.

‘Not this again,’ said Thonius.

The black volcanic rocks loomed in the distance above the sculpted red dunes. The heat from the gunshot star burned their skins.

‘Not here again,’ he murmured.

For all her bravado in the underhive, Angharad was immediately spooked. ‘This is a bad place and we have to leave it now,’ she declared. ‘Something is coming.’

She was right. Even Ravenor could feel it in the back of his mind: a crawling itch, the same sense of impending doom that had surrounded them the last, brief time they had passed through the red desert.

The housekeeper was clearly affected too. Without having to be asked or ordered, the housekeeper put the key in the lock and attempted to turn it. The door remained defiantly locked.

‘Come on, come on...’ Thonius sobbed.

The wind picked up, scooping sand from the ground and winnowing it around them. The housekeeper tried the door again.

‘Come on!’ screamed Thonius.

The housekeeper began rattling the key furiously, and then started banging at the door.

‘It won’t open,’ the housekeeper cried. It was the first emotional expression any of the housekeepers had made. ‘It won’t open! My key doesn’t work!’

‘No!’ cried Thonius.

‘Keep trying,’ Ravenor said.

‘Oh look, by the blood of my clan, look!’ Angharad called.

Something had appeared, cresting the line of black rocks. It looked like a wave at first, like fast-flowing liquid spilling over the rocks in a flood and rushing on across the duned regolith towards them.

But it wasn’t liquid.

‘Open the door,’ said Ravenor firmly.

‘It won’t open!’ the housekeeper screamed back.

The wave was made of organisms, a swarm of fast-moving black and white creatures. They came on in a rippling, scurrying tide, chittering and yapping. Organic armour glinted like lacquered steel in the sunlight. The organisms were man-sized bipeds with torsos and heads hunched low and forward like sprinters, and rigid, spike tails held out high to counterbalance them. Their limbs and bellies gleamed off-white, like dirty ice, but their backs and long heads were a polished onyx black where the armour was thickest. Dead black eyes, mere slits, gazed out from behind heavy nasal horns. The snapping, chittering mouths were full of needle teeth. Four sickle-hook arms were neatly folded under their upper bodies. There was a smell coming off them that was even more distressing than the clicking, chattering cries they were making. The smell was worse because it was not like anything any of them had ever smelled before. It was dry, and musky, and caustic, like wood polish, like fermented fruit-

mash, like the funerary spices of a mummified corpse. It was all of those things and none of them.

It was alien in the most extreme sense.

‘Please, please open the door!’ Thonius begged.

Bounding, sprinting, clicking, the wave bore down on the figures at the lonely door, gleaming, jostling black and white bodies and bouncing counterbalance tails. They were so fast, so agile, so many. Regolith dust rose in a shimmering cloud above them, lifted by their scurrying feet.

‘Holy Throne,’ Ballack managed to stammer.

The front of the wave was on them. Long-hooked limbs flicked up to strike.

‘Open the door!’ wailed Thonius.

‘It’s too late,’ said Ravenor.

PART THREE

THE LONG WAY ROUND



ONE

SHE WAS FREEZING cold. Lucic had taken her environment coat off her in an act of petty spite. ‘That’s for losing my jacks,’ he had said sullenly, tossing her garment off the dock into the pool.

Lucic’s friend was evidently a bounty hunter or hired gun. Tall and coarse, with a well-conditioned body of sinewy muscle, and a face that had been decorated with puckered burn tissue down one side, he wore a bodyglove armoured with reinforcing plates, and a quilted, fur-trimmed jacket. His weapon of choice was a cut-down lascarbine, ex-Guard issue. The man himself was probably ex-Guard issue too.

He’d searched Plyton unsympathetically for concealed weapons, tugging out the little Tronsvasse insurance she kept stowed in her waistband. His grubby hands had gone everywhere, and he’d been smiling while he worked.

‘Pig,’ Plyton had called him when he was done. Without hesitation, he had smacked her hard across the face with the back of his hand, and knocked her onto the deck.

‘Hey, don’t!’ Lucic had cried out.

‘What’s she to you?’ burn-face had asked. The look in burn-face’s eyes had forced Lucic to shrug and back down. Not so much a ‘friend’ after all. Down on the deck, her face stinging and her eyes hot, Plyton had noticed this detail.

Burn-face had dragged her up roughly and forced her to sit on an empty lube drum.

‘Don’t move,’ he had instructed.

It was hard to track the time, but she figured an hour must have passed. Lucic put on his coat and started to pace, Plyton’s combat shotgun slung

over his lanky shoulder. Burn-face had briefly dropped down into the underboat, and then returned, chewing on a ration bar from the boat's supply. He had several other bars stuffed into his coat pocket.

'So, what's the play?' Lucic had asked the hired gun lightly.

'We stay planted here and wait for the word,' burn-face had replied, munching. He ate fast and messily, like a wild animal. He sat down on a coil winder, and chewed some more. After a while, he rested his carbine against his leg, and took out Plyton's Tronsvasse. He started to play with it, stripping it out, popping the clip, and flicking the safety on and off. He aimed it at several imaginary targets around the docking pool to gauge its qualities.

'Nice piece,' he remarked. He looked at Plyton. She avoided his gaze. The cold was getting to her bones. She was shivering, and sat with her arms wrapped around her body.

Burn-face ate another ration bar and threw the waxed paper wrapper into the pool. Through the grille decking, Plyton could see it floating beneath her in the grease ice beside her slowly sinking coat.

The hired gun patted his pockets. 'Got a smoke? Lho or anything?' he asked Lucic.

'I'm out,' said Lucic distractedly, taking out his link and staring at it as if willing it to chime.

Burn-face looked at Plyton. 'You?'

She shook her head. Then, on inspiration, added, 'They were in my coat.'

Burn-face glared at Lucic. 'You daft bastard,' he growled.

Out here, a man needs all the friends he can get, eh? Well, Lucic, you're losing your only one fast.

'Best find something else to do to pass the time,' burn-face mused. He looked at Plyton again. 'You cold?'

She nodded.

'Maybe we get you a little colder still, then warm you up some.'

'Hey!' Lucic said. 'Don't be getting nasty with her.'

The bounty hunter got to his feet. 'Don't be getting nasty?' he replied, mimicking Luci8's prissy outrage. 'Frig you, nasty is what we do.'

'Even so—'

'I was told you were in on this. I was told you could be counted on.'

'I can, I can,' said Lucic, hastily. 'I did what you people wanted, didn't I? I did it right.'

The bounty hunter shrugged. He was chasing a lodged scrap of ration bar out of his teeth with his tongue. He found the scrap and spat it out.

'Big boys' games now,' he told Lucic. 'Big boys' rules. You better keep up.'

'I can keep up.'

'So why you so protective of this bitch?'

'I...' Lucic began. 'I didn't know we'd have to kill all of them.'

'Maybe we won't. Maybe we can all be very good friends. We'll see. They'll call and tell us how it pans out.'

'If it's a no?'

'Don't worry,' burn-face said, sitting back down and taking out Plyton's Tronsvasse again. 'That time comes, I'll do her. If you know what I mean.'

Lucic scowled and resumed pacing the deck.

The bounty hunter eased back on his seat and stared at the lapping water below.

Another ten minutes crawled by. Plyton was getting so bone cold she was afraid she might shut down. Hypothermia. If she passed out, Throne help her.

There was a rumble and a shudder. The hanging chains in the wharf area, some of them massive, trembled and swung. The House was adjusting its stance again. Chunks of grubby ice that had formed around the chain links were dislodged by the movement, and splashed down into the pool.

'It's taking too long,' Lucic said.

'It takes as long as it takes.'

'I'm going to call up,' Lucic said, taking out his link again.

Bum-face shrugged. 'Knock yourself out.'

Lucic keyed his link. 'Hello? Copy back. This is Lucic in the dock. What's taking so long up there?'

'I DON'T NEED your frigging agitation in my ear, Lucic.' Worna snarled into his wrist-mounted link. We're sitting tight, so sit tight with us. I'll tell you whoa or go as soon as there's a whoa or go to tell you.'

The Wych House's theatre chamber was painfully silent. Worna's paid guns had spread out around the room in a securing spread. The housekeepers had been forced down in a little huddle of seated figures, with two men watching them. The candles and lamps flickered.

Kys and Nayl sat side-by-side on the raised walkway with their backs against the outer wall. Two men had been posted to watch them too. One of them had been given the psy-scanner, and was studying it closely as if his life depended on it.

Which it does, Nayl thought, in a small, savoured moment of optimism.

Worna was standing on the upper platform, staring at the closed, silent door. They'd heard his side of the vox-link exchange. At the mention of Lucic's name, Nayl had risked a look at Kys.

She met the look. *Lucic. Betrayed.*

Worna clumped down the steps to rejoin them. He towered over their seated figures, then squatted down. Kys could smell his breath. Gutter meat. Bad rations.

'Taking a long time,' he offered, almost comradely.

'I don't know what's taking a long time, because I don't know what's going on,' Kys replied.

'Not so much talk from you, witch,' Worna grumbled in his penetratingly low voice. He looked at Nayl.

'What the hell happened to you?' he asked.

'Life happened,' Nayl replied coldly.

Worna frowned. 'We saw some fine times in the old days. You and me, and the others. Scored plenty. Now look at you, taking the Throne's coin.'

What drives a man to do that, I wonder?’

‘I got a good offer.’

‘From the ordos?’ Worna laughed. ‘This Ravenor cripple?’

‘Originally, no. His master, Eisenhorn,’ Nayl replied.

‘Oh, yeah. I heard of him. Eisenhorn. Tough old bird. But he’s dead, right? That’s what I was told.’

‘I think he’s dead.’

‘And now you throw your lot in with this crippled scumbag?’

‘You wouldn’t understand.’

‘No?’ Lucius Worna shrugged. ‘Maybe not. This isn’t some frigging loyalty thing, is it? Please, please, powers that be, don’t tell me Harlon frigging Nayl went and got himself a conscience.’

Nayl laughed despite himself, and shook his head.

‘Walk with me,’ Worna said, rising, and beckoning Nayl to follow him. Nayl got up and joined Worna in a long, slow circuit of the railed deck.

‘You wanna smoke?’ Worna asked.

‘A smoke’d be good.’

Worna flicked his fingers and one of his men proffered a pack of lho-sticks. They took one each, and the man lit them obediently.

Kys watched. The Harlon Nayl she knew never smoked these days.

Lucius Worna took a deep draw and exhaled. Nayl toyed with his lho-stick rather more circumspectly.

‘Wanted to get you away from that witch,’ Worna confided. ‘She’s bad news.’

‘If you say so.’

‘If I say so? What is this, be nice to Lucius week?’

‘You got the guns, you got the manpower, hell, you got the drop, Lu. What the frig else am I gonna do except be nice to you?’

Worna chuckled. ‘In your place, I’d do the same. But then, you always knew how to play a scene, didn’t you, Nayl?’

‘I’ve had my moments.’

‘Hell, yeah. Good work. We did good work. You remember what’s his name?’

‘Probably What was his name?’

‘Shinto... Shinko... Shimko... some frig like that.’

‘Alek Shinato?’

‘That’s the frigger!’ Worna exclaimed. ‘Throne, that was a good day. Sarum, on the look out. You got a tip on the down low and we were in. But how many frigging gun-happy trogs did that guy have waiting for us?’

‘Almost too many,’ Nayl admitted.

‘Almost too many, that’s a fact. Las like confetti. Bracer bought it right off.’

‘Bracer was a stump,’ said Nayl. ‘He was asking to be wiped the day he applied for his licence.’

‘Yeah, that’s true.’

They walked on a little way.

‘I was in the chasm that day, Nayl,’ said Worna. ‘Pinned. Took one in the leg, still pains me. But you came through. Cleanest kill shots I ever saw, no lie. The two stiffs with the cannon, then Shinto himself. End of story.’

‘Shinato.’

Worna grunted. ‘He’s dead. What does it matter?’

‘I’m the one pinned now, Lu.’

‘Yes, yes, you are.’

‘Never seems fair to me,’ Nayl remarked, knocking the ash off his lho-stick. ‘We work for coin, always have. It’s never about ties or bonds or loyalties. I saved your life that day, but it doesn’t count now.’

‘Maybe so, maybe no,’ Worna replied. ‘This is why I wanted to talk to you, in private, so to speak. I don’t like to see you go swirling down the head with these other mongrels. There’d be a place for you, just say the word.’

‘A place?’

Worna gestured around them. 'I got a new crew together, with a good source of retainer fees, all the perks. These bastards are the best, but I could always use another good gun. Say the word, and you're working for me.'

'You're joking? I've been serving the Inquisition for decades.'

'I know. But, like you said, we work for coin. No ties, no bonds, no loyalties. You've been working for pay, and pay is what I'm offering. Since when did you or me care who was servicing our bill?'

'This is because you owe me?' asked Nayl.

'This is precisely because I owe you. My life, I owe you. I'm offering you your life in payment of that debt. Join my crew. I can square it with Culzean. Pay's sweet, did I mention that? I don't like the thought of you skull-shot with the others, and I have a strong feeling that's how it's going to end. Come and play with the winning team, now, before it's too late.'

Nayl drew on his lho-stick. 'Nice offer. Tempting. But how the frig would you ever trust me? Hello? Ordo work, for decades, remember?'

'Well,' murmured Worna, 'you'd have to prove yourself, to me and the crew.'

'How?'

Lucius Worna looked back around the chamber to where Kys was sitting under guard. He slid a vicious combat dagger out of his hip rig. 'Gut the frigging telekine witch for me, would you?'

Nayl blinked. Then he smiled and took hold of the blade.

'Make it last,' Lucius Worna advised.



TWO

LEAPING, BOUNDING, SKIPPING, they pour down over us under the red heat of the gunshot sun. Their chitter hits us first, then their stink, and then the impressing weight of their torrent.

Carl is screaming. The housekeeper is screaming. Both are hammering at the unyielding door.

I know the door is sealed and will not open because I know this is a trap. Zygmunt Molotch's last, best and most horrific trap.

The first of them land on me, scraping their hook blades off my chair's hull. The weight of them pushes my chair down into the dust and threatens to topple me. There is a sour stink of the adrenal hormone driving their aggression.

What are these chattering creatures, these monsters? They are unknown to me, unknown to Imperial lore. What does it matter anyway? They are death. They are my death.

Ballack is firing his weapon, yelling out. The wave rolling in on him falters, punctured. Vile, purplish ichor explodes from shot-blasted bodies and clumps the dry sand where it splashes. How long can he hold them back?

Angharad. No wonder Harlon is so enamoured of her. She's like a fury, standing her ground, her long steel swinging. Limbs fly off, hooked members flipping and spinning away through the air. Snouts are truncated. Horns are turned aside, hooks deflected. Ichor sprays. Evisorex bites. The *Ewl Wyla Scryi*. The genius of sharpness. I doubt any Carthaen in clan history has ever faced down such a foe single-handed. She is magnificent. She turns and spins, kicks and slices, driving the organisms back, damaged and slain.

I estimate she will last another minute and a half.

Carl turns from the door, firing his autopistol wildly. He scores hits. It's difficult not to, given the sheer wall of squirming menace driving into us. Leaping forms burst in mid-air and tumble, twitching.

These are impossible odds. We are going to die. Hook blades squeal and scrape against my chair's surface. We are going to die. How quickly is up to me.

I fling the increasing layers of gouging, yapping bodies off me with a mind-flick. Some of the creatures sail back a long way into the ranks behind them. Righting my chair, I send out another telekinetic burst that pulps the front rank in a blizzard of purple-black jelly and shattering chitin.

I am an Imperial inquisitor. I will not go down without a fight.

I pop my weapon modules out of my chair's chassis. Paired psy-cannons. I open fire and blitz the black and white organisms bounding towards me. Ballack has drawn his back-up weapon, an auto-snub. He fires into the oncoming swarm. There's been no time to reload his las.

Evisorex rips and shreds. Bodies are opened, bisected. Hind limbs still attached to violently lashing tails fly past, gushing noxious liquid from their severed waists. I sustain my fire, as long as my hopper loads last. Leaping horrors pop, burst, fracture, explode in showers of viscous matter.

'Open the door! Open the door!' Carl is screaming.

The housekeeper has sunk to the ground in shock, the key falling from limp hands.

I can just hear the housekeeper murmuring. What is that?

The Great Devourer. The Great Devourer...

The action is savage, unstinting. The more I hit and burst, the more of them there are, capering and bounding in. Their chattering mouths seem to be laughing at us.

'I'm out!' Ballack shrieks. Angharad leaps to defend him, decapitating two of the creatures and kicking another aside. The bodies are piling up. Ballack cowers behind her, trying to slam home a fresh clip.

He's too slow. A scything limb catches Angharad across the forehead and knocks her down. A glancing blow, not enough to kill.

But she's dead anyway.

Unless—

I keep the chair's cannons firing. I reach out, and ware Angharad, snatching her up before she hits the ground. Evisorex is a purring monster in my hands. It knows what it has to do. I let it drive into the enemy, remembering my blade schooling – from dear, lost Arianhrod long ago – and allowing Angharad's training to leak from her unconscious mind to inform my movements. I cut them apart, monster after monster after leaping, pouncing monster.

Ballack has reloaded. He stands up, blasting into the endless wave. He kills every single thing charging at him except one. A gouging hook tears into his thigh. He falls, passing out in pain-shock.

I ware him too, dragging him back into the fight, making him shoot again. His gun roars.

+Carl! I need you!+

Thonius has also reloaded. He fires his pistol point-blank into the wall of jabbing, black, chitinous snouts and sees braincases burst with each pump of his trigger.

He has only a few shots left.

+Carl!+

Carl Thonius goes down. I see it happen. I see his frail body, limbs cartwheeling, carried over by the pouring wave of creatures. I try to reach out, but I can't ware him too. I'm stretched too far with Ballack, Angharad, and my own chair. The chair is still valiantly pumping cannon shots into the endless legion of monsters.

They land on me, clawing and clacking. They push me back, despite the holes I blast in them. The chittering monsters explode and topple away, but there are always more pouring in behind.

They weigh me down. They overturn me. This is the end. Their abominable hooks screech and tear at my chair. Internal system alarms

sound as they puncture my armour. Too many, way too many.

This is the end. *Gregor, I'm so sorry. I—*

The world, red already, goes blood-red.

I am blinded by blood. I feel their blades dig into me.

I try one last time to—

RED, RED, RED, a flare of insulted rage—

LUCIUS WORNA LOOKED up at the door sharply.

‘What the hell?’ he muttered.

The door was rocking in its frame, pounding. Red light, like the issue of a dying sun, seeped through the gaps between the door and its frame, and shafted into the Wych House.

‘Something’s coming back,’ Nayl said. As Worna looked back around at him, Nayl flicked the smouldering butt of his lho-stick into Worna’s left eye. Worna snarled in pain and recoiled, clutching his face. Nayl lunged forward with the blade Worna had given him, but there was suddenly no time to finish the job. No time at all.

Up on the highest platform, the door shuddered. It flexed in its frame, the wood bulging, and blew open on its hinges. A huge, pressurised gout of scouring fire and boiling red energy vomited out of the doorway.

The fire-cloud was filthy and red. It seared out through the door’s frame in a great, concussive belch that shook the platform and the room itself. Everyone in the theatre chamber was knocked to the floor. All the candles and lamps around the edge of the platform flew off and smashed in the lower floor space. Spilled lamp oil ignited. The expanding fireball from the doorway rolled up into the dome overhead. Several electrical systems, overcooked, exploded in showers of sparks.

Another belch of flame gusted out of the open door, as fierce as the first. The chamber shook again. Fires caught and began to blaze in the girdered vault of the theatre’s dome. Something, a photo-lumin lamp perhaps, exploded with a volatile report and spat debris across the chamber.

The Wych House lurched, as if wounded or stung. It staggered. Those who had managed to get on their feet fell back down again. The chamber was lit amber by the spreading, cracking fires and the eerie red glow pouring through the open door.

Nayl struggled to rise, but Worna was already standing. He grabbed Nayl by the throat, lifted him off the walkway with one hand, and threw him like a doll. Nayl hit the rail, tumbled over it, and disappeared down onto the lower deck where the lamp oil fires were raging. Worna turned, gazing at the wide open door and the red sunlight streaming through it.

More flames, weaker now, billowed out of the open doorway, followed by a shimmer of alien dust. Then silence.

‘On your frigging feet!’ Worna yelled at his men. He drew his chainsword, moving towards the steps that led up to the top platform. Dazed and bewildered, his men hurried to follow him, all except the two watching Kys. The hooded housekeepers remained in a cowering huddle.

Something quick and jerky moved, fleetingly, inside the red glare of the doorway. Two gleaming silhouettes leapt forwards together, and hung for a moment, perching on the sides of the door frame with their nimble, clawed feet, like birds. Then they bounced down onto the platform into view. Tails high and straight, they stepped forward slowly, their hook claws scraping the deck.

The organisms chattered back and forth, snouts clacking, stabbing tongues flicking out between needle teeth, as they advanced carefully into this new, unknown location. The smell of them was rank and sickening. Crouching against the wall on the walkway ring behind the men guarding her, Kys stared up at the prowling creatures in disgust and involuntary fear. Some of the bounty hunters around Worna began backing away. Even Worna had come to a halt, halfway up the steps.

‘Doren, Kixo,’ Worna hissed. ‘Get up there and take those ugly sons of bitches down.’

The two men chosen advanced nervously up the steps onto the upper platform, carbines raised. The creatures stopped in their tracks and seemed

to observe the slowly approaching men with curiosity.

‘Got a clean kill shot on the first,’ one of the cautious bounty hunters muttered, aiming his carbine from the shoulder. ‘Get ready to take the oth —’

The nearest of the monsters turned, regarded him with a tilt of its head, and pounced with an abrupt, effortless spring of its hind legs. The bounty hunter was brought down under its weight, his carbine firing uselessly into the roof. It had him pinned for an instant, face up, on the deck. He began to scream. Its four hook limbs flicked out and snapped down like shears, quartering him like a portioned game bird.

The entire kill had taken barely a second. With an anguished howl, the other man opened fire, blasting the predator off his colleague’s messy corpse. The shots blew its torso open in a spatter of purple, sticky sap, and knocked it clean off the platform. The second monster yapped like a feral dog and sprang at the shooter.

All of the other bounty hunters opened fire instinctively, shooting from their positions on the raised walkway and the upper steps. The broadside of frantic shots shredded the thing in mid-air. They also slew its intended prey. The bounty hunter toppled forward in a mist of blood.

‘Cease fire!’ Worna yelled. ‘Cease fire, you dumb friggers! You just wasted Kixo!’ His spooked men were no longer listening to him. A few were backing towards the exits. The rest were training their weapons at the open door.

Horned black snouts came snuffling out of the red light. Drooling teeth chattered. A dozen more of the black and white things sprang through the doorway into the chamber, then a dozen more, bouncing and jumping.

All hell broke loose.

Worna’s men began blasting indiscriminately. The red glow of the burning chamber lit up with a shower of bright white las-bolts. Gleaming alien bodies ruptured and fell, thrashing in death agonies, but there were too many of them. The chattering predators, agile and shockingly fast,

ploughed forwards into the men, cutting them apart. The shooting turned to screaming. Those of Worna's men that could, broke and ran.

'Stand your frigging ground!' Worna bellowed from the upper steps. He turned in time to see one of the black and white horrors launching itself at him. Lucius Worna didn't flinch. He met its attack with his chainsword and cut it in half. It was not a clean kill. The creature's limbs were still flailing and stabbing wildly and it crashed into him, throwing him backwards down the steps.

The men guarding Kys had fled. She rose, fighting the urge to follow them. She had to find Nayl. She had to see if Ravenor would return, although if these things were gathered on the far side of the door, she didn't hold out much hope of that happening.

She ran towards the huddled, moaning housekeepers. Behind her, Worna's men were blasting and dying.

'Move!' she yelled at the housekeepers. 'Get out of here!'

None of them stirred. They rocked and mumbled.

'You idiots!' she cried. Something slammed her into the wall. One of Worna's bruisers had shoved her aside in his effort to escape.

A black and white shape landed directly on his back. He grunted as he was flattened, face down, beneath it. It quickly snipped off his arms and head.

Kys heard and smelled the torrent of human blood emptying down through the grilled walkway decking from the butchered corpse. She rose slowly into a crouch, edging her kineblades out. The long metal blades came free from her bodice and floated up on either side of her face, pointing forward, suspended by her telekinetic impulse.

The monster calmly bent down and nipped meat from the corpse with a delicate snap of its teeth. She saw the glossy blackness of its upper armour, scribbled with lines of old scars, the waxy whiteness of its lower body, where patches of thread-worm parasites clustered. She could smell the metallic hormone stench of it, and feel its presence scratching against her mind. It raised its head slowly and turned its horned snout towards

Kys. Its eyes were awful, lifeless slits above a rictus grin. Rivulets of bright human blood dribbled down its gleaming, bone-white chin and dripped onto the walkway.

It chittered, its mouth snapping and chattering, tongue stabbing. Tasting, sensing, smelling, all at once. Throat sacs under its chin pulsed and swelled.

Its powerful legs tensed, and it sprang towards her.

Kys rolled furiously. Her paired kineblades met the pouncing thing in mid-air, punching clean through it like high velocity rounds. She'd aimed for the throat sacs, the softest, least armoured part of it. The sacs burst as the blades punctured them, and yellow fluid sprayed out. Chitinous dorsal plates cracked a nanosecond later, as the exiting blades blew out of the monster's back in foggy sprays. The kinetic shock stopped it short, mid-pounce, and dropped it onto the walkway beside her. It writhed, snapping at her, tail curling and flopping, its hook limbs thrashing. Then the entire walkway section it lay on fell away, eaten to pulp by the bio-acid that had poured out of its throat sacs. It crashed down onto the theatre floor space below.

Kys leapt to her feet, summoning her kineblades back. There was nothing left of them. They had been reduced to spurs of dissolving metal by the corrosive contents of the throat sacs.

Kys let them fall. The hairs on her neck rose. She turned, very, very slowly.

Head down, yapping softly, another of the things stepped towards her along the walkway.



THREE

THE HOUSE SHOOK and staggered. There was an echoing boom from above them, and then another. Plyton was thrown off her perch. She landed hard on the dock's decking and rolled several times. She almost pitched off into the water.

'What the hell was that?' Lucic was demanding, ripping out his link. Bum-face had been thrown onto the deck too. He got up, angry.

'Give me that!' he snarled.

Her arms shaking, Plyton pulled herself up. Down in the dock pool, the water was slopping feverishly. The underboat was straining at its chains, bucking in the icy froth. The chains creaked and pulled. The House shook again – a deep, ugly lurch – and the boat bucked more furiously. The hanging chains swished and shook. Ice crackled down into the washing swell.

'Worna? Worna!' bum-face yelled into the link.

There was no response.

'Worna?'

Plyton ploughed into them both from behind. Lucic fell and hit his head against a fuel drum. Burn-face tried to turn, but she slammed her fist into the side of his head repeatedly.

They landed hard. The bounty hunter's carbine hit the decking and slithered out of reach. He rolled, tucked his legs up and savagely kicked her in the torso with both feet.

Winded, gasping, Plyton flew backwards through the air. She smashed into some of the dangling chains and managed to grab one.

She was still travelling. Momentum turned her into a pendulum. Hanging from the chain, she soared out over the pool. Thrashing ice water sloshed

ten metres below her.

Plyton clung on. The chain swung her back over the dock. Burn-face had rolled onto his knees, and she kicked out at him, but missed, as she swung past. He was reaching for the fallen carbine.

She swung back, missing him again, dangling out above the churning pool at the extremity of her backswing. Her hands had locked up, turned to aching numbness by the touch of the chain loops.

She swung in for a second time. Burn-face had risen, dodging her sweeping form as it came in. He rolled hard and came up with her Tronsvasse in his hands as she swept back again.

He grinned as he fired it at her. The weapon dry clicked. He hadn't reloaded it since stripping it down.

She swung past him, her momentum diminishing. Then the House staggered again and wrenched her around furiously, jerking her up over the pool with such violence her chain became slack for a second.

Burn-face rolled again, diving for the fallen carbine. She sailed down at him and struck him hard. Plyton viced her dangling legs around him and carried him on with her.

Burn-face smashed head-first into an oil drum.

He fell away from her, his neck snapped, and slammed onto the dock.

Plyton let go of the chain and fell hard.

Dazed, she rose and glanced around. Burn-face's corpse lay face down on the grilled deck. Lucic had vanished. She stumbled forward and picked up the bounty hunter's lascarbine.

The House shook again. It listed badly to one side and she fell onto the sloping deck. With a gunshot bang, one of the chains mooring the underboat broke. Its prow swung around in the frothing pool.

'Lucic?' she yelled.

LUCIC HAD RUN down the service tunnel into the drum chamber. The cargo hoist was still up. He gathered Plyton's shotgun to his chest. Weird echoes rang down the riser shaft. Was that gunfire? Shouting?

Lucic strode towards the spiral staircase, coping with the relentless, sickening roll and shift of the deck.

He started up the stairs and reached the roof hatch. He pulled the inset handle and it swung down. He looked up into the dark shaft above.

THE CREATURE LUNGED at Kys. She met it with her kine-force, and hurled it away from her along the walkway.

That took effort. The creature was strong, vital, bristling with energy, and its chitinous structure was as hard as steel. It landed in an ungainly sprawl, powerful hind limbs skidding and scrabbling for purchase. It sprang up again, undeterred, and charged back towards her. Kys turned and leapt across the gaping walkway section that the acid had removed. She landed beside the dead bounty hunter, held out her hand, and his fallen carbine flew from the deck into her grasp. She turned back and blew the bounding creature in half.

The whole chamber was on fire. The House shuddered and realigned, wounded and dying. Predatory shapes, tails-high, leapt through the smoke and flames, dismembering the last of Worna's troop.

'Harlon?' she yelled. 'Harlon?'

'He ain't here,' Lucius Worna said. He stood in front of her, aiming a bolt pistol at her heart. Part of his face was eaten away to the bone by acid, and his carapace armour was covered in fresh, deep gouges. 'He ain't here, you witch. Toss the carbine.'

She obeyed. Covering her, he raised his link. Kys glanced up, and saw a pair of predators on the platform rail above, rocking as they prepared to pounce on him.

'Siskind!' Worna yelled into his link. 'Teleport me! Now!'

Lucius Worna smiled at her, fired his pistol, and vanished. A cyclonic blur of pink light sucked him away. With a pop of decompression, the teleport cone removed Worna, his weapon and his smile.

All it left behind as it faded was the bolt round, ripping towards her.

Kys caught it. It took all of her telekinetic strength. She stopped the blistering round in mid-air a metre from her body and held it dead, at bay. She fought, her mind bending with the effort. The bolt round, stationary, began to deform and melt against the mind-wall her kine force had thrown up. It thrust against her will, half a metre away, gouging through her telekinetic defence.

She could see it clearly, spinning in space, metal sweating off it in slow, blobby droplets as it superheated.

With a gasp, Kys threw herself down. Released, the bolt round tore over her head and hit the wall behind her with an explosive crump.

Kys rose, the smoke making her choke. The two creatures perched on the rail bounced down onto the walkway ahead of her and began to advance.

They yapped and chattered.

She had no mind-strength left any more, nothing to keep them at bay.

They leapt.

They burst in splashes of ichor.

Gun pods blazing, Ravenor's chair swept out of the doorway. It was horribly gouged and dented. Suspension fluid trickled out of deep cut scars.

Ravenor turned slowly, raking the walkway with sustained pod fire. Skipping, jinking predators exploded and died.

+Patience!+

+Throne, you're alive !+

+Help me!+

He was in pain. He was hurt. Kys scrambled up the steps onto the upper platform.

'The Wych House is finished.' she yelled over the roar of the flames. 'We have to leave.'

+Help me, Patience.+

Bleeding from an awful leg wound, Ballack stumbled out of the doorway behind Ravenor. He was carrying Thonius, who was limp and lifeless.

‘What happened?’ Kys yelled.

+No time to explain. Get them clear, Patience. That’s all I ask.+

Kys ran to Ballack and grabbed hold of him. His eyes were blank. He was being puppetted by Ravenor.

‘I’ve got him!’ she cried.

Ravenor let Ballack go, and he slumped. Thonius looked dead. He was covered with blood. The House shuddered again, and slipped. The deck pitched wildly.

+Gideon!+

Something detonated above them. The House rocked.

+Get them clear, Patience! Get them to the underboat while there’s still a chance!+

Kys sucked in her breath and took hold of Ballack and Thonius. She carried them, more with her tired mind than with her arms, down the steps onto the walkway, and then down again into the burning hell of the chamber’s floor space.

+Please come with me!+ she sent back.

+I’ll follow. Angharad is still through there. I’m waring her. I can get her out.+

Up on the top platform, Ravenor swung around to face the doorway.

+Come on. Come *on*.+

A black and white form pounced at his chair. He blew it apart with his cannons.

Kys reached the hoist and dropped Ballack and Thonius onto its platform. She reached for the lever.

+Gideon!+

+Go, Patience! I’ll be right after you!+

Kys threw the lever. The hoist began to descend.

Kys heard a scuttering, scrabbling sound. She looked up.

Five of the glossy black and white monsters were racing down the sheer walls of the riser shaft after her, limbs rippling as they tore down the soot-

black sides of the drop.

SHOTGUN RAISED, LUCIC took another step up the spiral staircase. The House shook again, violently. That was bad, and he knew it. The House was reaching the end of its existence.

Lucic aimed his shotgun up into the darkness of the stair shaft. He was sure he'd heard something above him, something descending.

He couldn't see anything. He lowered his gun. Reaching into his back pocket, he took out his stablight and flicked it on. He shone the narrow beam up into the gloom.

Nothing. Except... teeth.

Something above him yapped.

Hiram Lucic made a frantic grab for his shotgun.

KYS GRABBED BALLACK'S laspistol and fired it up at the monsters scurrying down the shaft after them.

It snapped dead. It was spent. She reached frantically into his pockets for a fresh clip.

The hoist was descending too slowly, far slower than the scurrying monsters.

CARBINE RAISED IN one hand, lamp in the other, Plyton stepped into the drum chamber. She could hear the hoist trundling down.

A loud, rattling crash came from the direction of the spiral staircase. She stepped closer to investigate. It was her shotgun. Her shotgun had just fallen down the spiral staircase onto the deck. The last time she'd seen, it had been in Lucie's possession.

With slow, nauseating horror, Plyton realised that an astonishingly copious amount of blood was streaming down out of the roof hatch.

Swallowing hard, Plyton cinched the carbine over her shoulder and picked up her shotgun. She backed away from the staircase towards the

base plate of the hoist, keeping her shotgun steady. She tried to watch both: the staircase and the hoist, as soon as it appeared.

The hoist dropped into view. Kys was crouching at the centre of the platform, with Ballack and Thonius sprawled on either side of her.

‘Maud! Maud! Shoot!’ Kys screamed, pointing up the shaft. Plyton leapt up onto the hoist platform between Kys and the unconscious men. She fired upwards, blindly pumping shot after shot up into the dark. Kys dragged Ballack and Thonius off the hoist behind her.

Kys looked back. She had a prickling feeling that Plyton had hit something. Kys reached out and jerked Plyton backwards off the hoist with her telekinesis the instant before three ruptured, flopping bodies crashed down onto it out of the shaft.

Plyton got up, staring at the dead things. ‘What the hell are those?’ she asked in total revulsion.

‘We’ve got to get back to the boat,’ Kys barked, ignoring the question.

‘Where’s Ravenor?’

‘He’s coming.’ Kys hurried forward to throw the lever and send the hoist back up, but it was dead. Noxious bio-acid leaking from the burst throat sacs of one of the dead things had reduced the motor to metal goo.

‘How is he coming?’ asked Plyton. ‘What about Nayl and swordgirl?’

‘He’ll use his psi,’ Kys replied.+Gideon, the hoist is out of action. Gideon?+

There was no answer. Kys dragged Ballack to his feet. He was coming around, groggy. She threw Thonius’s limp body over her shoulder.

‘Come on!’ She started off towards the service tunnel, dragging Ballack after her, stumbling and confused. Plyton fell in behind her, moving backwards, shotgun raised. Something black and white scuttled down the spiral staircase, and smiled. She blasted it apart.

The deck had twisted to a sharper angle, and the House was rattling with a constant shudder. Metal groaned and protested. In the docking pool, the water was boiling up through the wharf decking, a mass of froth and

pressure. The underboat, still anchored by one sea chain, was bucking and thumping violently against the dockside fenders in the immense swell.

Using telekinesis, Kys shoved Thonius's body unceremoniously across and in through the side hatch. Then she jumped across with Ballack. They nearly slipped off into the surging water, but she braced them with her mind and they scrambled in through the hatch.

The pilot servitor had already closed the top hatch.

'We have to leave. Right now,' he told Kys.

'We're not all here,' she replied, moving back to the side hatch.

'If the House goes,' the servitor replied, 'it'll take us with it. We won't have clearance to exit the dock pool. Cut the chain loose.'

'We're not all here yet!' Kys yelled at him. 'Get to the helm and get ready!'

The pilot servitor scurried forward. She heard the fans start up and test-rev. She got to the hatch and looked out. Plyton had remained on the dock side, and was standing with her back to the pool, watching the approach from the service tunnel.

'Maud?'

'No sign!' Plyton yelled back over the roaring water and squealing metal.

+Gideon?+

Nothing.

Plyton was suddenly shooting. The gritty boom of her shotgun rang out again and again. Over a dozen of the creatures were scurrying out of the sendee tunnel towards her. She killed two of them.

'Maud!'

There was a sudden, stomach-flipping lurch and the House tilted even more sharply, throwing Plyton down. A curious, deep moaning sound began. It was coming from the pool. It was the sound of water, stirring in vast quantities. The house had dipped so steeply, the air bell of the docking pool had lost its integrity, and oceanic water was surging up into the pool bay with shocking speed and fury. The docking pool was flooding.

‘Maud!’

Plyton rose on the sharply inclined decking and leapt. She hit the side of the see-sawing underboat and Kys dragged her in through the hatch. Scrambling, slipping, half-falling, the chattering things came after her.

Kys slammed the hatch shut and heard hooks clang and scrape against the outer hull.

‘The sea chain!’ the pilot servitor shouted at her. ‘What about the sea chain?’

The colossal power of the ocean answered him. The force of the flood lifted the underboat, slammed it against the metal dock, and then yanked it away. Black and white bodies tumbled away into the boiling water. The remaining sea chain caught, strained, and parted with an explosive crack.

Released, the underboat rolled, righted, and fought the rising, crushing energy of the sea. The pilot blew air ballast and gunned his cavitation drive and attitude fans.

‘What are you doing?’ Kys screamed.

‘We have to get out!’ the pilot servitor yelled back.

She lunged forward, but stopped herself. What could she do? Force him to stay? Kill him?

Even if they stayed, what could they accomplish? The House was flooding, and was minutes, maybe seconds, from losing its foothold forever.

Patience Kys was a supremely capable, confident woman. She could do many things, against almost any odds.

But she couldn’t beat this. She was helpless. They were helpless. The ones they’d left behind, if they weren’t dead already, were doomed.

+Gideon!+ She sent with such anguished force Plyton and Ballack winced.

There was no answer. There would never be again.



FOUR

NAYL WOKE TO find himself in hell.

He was sprawled in the bottom floor space of the theatre chamber. The deck was at an almost forty degree slope. His head pounded and his throat hurt. He remembered Worna grabbing him.

He rose, swaying. The area around him was alive with leaping flames. His coat was on fire. He took it off and threw it aside.

He made his way over to the hoist, but it was gone, and the black riser shaft stared up at him.

There were bodies on the ground, two of Worna's hired guns. They looked as if they had been snipped clumsily into pieces by giant scissors. He helped himself to the shotgun one of them had dropped.

Something moved in the flames nearby. A dead-eyed horror with a rictus smile leapt out of the dancing fire to kill him.

No hesitation. His newly acquired shotgun barked, and punched it back where it had come from in a drizzle of purple fluid.

Fighting the sloping deck, he reached the lower steps and got onto the walkway. There was no one around, no one alive, anyway. He saw four more dead from Worna's band, the corpses of two housekeepers rent limb from limb, and the crumpled forms of three more things like the one he had just wasted.

'What in Throne's name are these things?' he muttered.

Nayl clambered around the walkway, leaping over a missing section of deck that looked as if it had been burned away by acid. He made it to the upper steps. Serious-sounding explosions thumped somewhere outside the ruined chamber. The whole place was on fire.

He crawled up onto the sloping upper platform. The roof dome above was a riotous inferno, and flames from below were searing up around the metal disk of the platform. The doorframe was still standing, the door open and swinging, the red light of somewhere else shining through it.

Ravenor's chair sat facing the door. It was scratched and battered, punctured in places. Clear fluid was dripping out of it.

'Ravenor?'

'Is that you, Harlon?'

Nayl staggered over to reach him.

'What the hell is going on?'

'I'm sorry.' Ravenor replied, his voxsponded voice frail and thready, as if the system were damaged. Or as if *he* were damaged. 'I'm very sorry. We're not getting out of here.'

'Where are the others?'

'Kys has made her way out. She took Carl and Ballack with her. I hope they made it to the underboat. I pray they did. I keep calling, but I'm very tired. My mind is weak. I can't reach Kys.'

'What about Plyton?' Nayl asked.

Ravenor sighed.

'What about Angharad?' Nayl said more firmly.

'I'm still trying. She's there, I can feel her. But...'

'Gideon? For Throne's sake, is she still in there?'

'I'm waring her. She... she kept them at bay. She's still fighting them. I don't know how much longer she can last. She's an amazing woman, that Arianhrod.'

'You mean Angharad.'

'What?'

'You mean Angharad.'

'Yes, of course.'

Another explosion rocked the chamber. Nayl stepped towards the door. 'Angharad!' he yelled into the red light. 'Angharad!'

‘Wait, Harlon.’ Ravenor whispered. ‘Wait, she’s...’

Something moved on the other side of the door. Backlit by the red glow, a figure limped into view.

Angharad. She was covered in blood and smears of purple ichor. Her leather armour was torn, and hanging off her in places. Her long steel smoked. She walked slowly out of the doorway onto the platform, leading the housekeeper guide behind her by the hand, like a child.

‘Oh Throne!’ Nayl cried, running to them. The door slammed shut in its frame behind them.

With a sob of pain and exhaustion, Ravenor let Angharad go. She swayed, but she was conscious. Blood dripped from her mouth. Nayl tried to hold her, but she pushed him off. She took two long steps towards Ravenor’s dented chair and rested the tip of Evisorex on its front cowl.

‘You bastard.’ she rasped. ‘Without my permission. Without my permission! You were inside me. You *were* me.’

‘I apologise,’ said Ravenor.

‘You have violated my honour and the honour of my clan. You were inside me! I alone choose who gets to be inside me! That was mind-rape! I should gut you for this offence and—’

‘I apologise,’ Ravenor repeated. ‘I did what I had to do. Ballack and Thonius may be alive, alive right now, because of what I did.’

Angharad sank to her knees and let Evisorex slip to the deck. She shook with wracking sobs. Nayl crouched beside her and held her.

‘But as a consequence, we are doomed,’ said Ravenor. ‘I am so very sorry I have brought you to this end with me. The House is flooding and dying. There is no escape.’

‘There’s got to be,’ said Nayl, looking up. He suddenly pushed Angharad away and leapt upright with his shotgun raised. A black and white shape, tail high, had just crept onto the upper platform behind Ravenor. It stole forwards, claws scratching off the deck plates. It raised its head, sniffing and yapping, its tongue stabbing out between its teeth.

‘Same to you,’ said Nayl, and killed it with a single shot. Its thrashing body flew backwards off the platform. Nayl looked around at Ravenor. ‘There’s got to be a way out.’

‘I can’t find one,’ Ravenor replied. ‘I have been searching. I’m right, aren’t I, housekeeper?’

The housekeeper looked up sharply. Its cowed head had been bowed. It was toying with the key in its hands with grazed, bleeding fingers.

‘Yes,’ the housekeeper replied. ‘We have no boats, no escape pods. When the House dies, we die too.’

‘That’s a load of—’ Nayl began.

‘Harlon,’ said Ravenor calmly. His fatigue was so great, he could barely summon the effort. ‘When the House dies, it will let go of the ice above. It will fall, and when it falls, it will fall into the abyss. What was it Lucic called it? Wholly Water, Harlon. Without a measurable bottom. In a minute or two, the water pressure will crush the House like an egg. Even at my best, I couldn’t protect us, certainly not long enough to get us back to the surface. Even then, the ice... and, as you may have noticed, I’m not at my best.’

‘The Plyton woman was right,’ said Angharad softly. ‘This place will kill us more surely than the void itself.’

‘No,’ murmured Nayl. ‘Screw this, no. We don’t just give up and wait to die.’

‘Sometimes, that’s a warrior’s fate,’ said Angharad. She picked up her steel and wiped the blade before sheathing it. The blade was stained and bruised with acid.

‘Balls to that,’ Nayl snapped. ‘That’s fancy warrior talk. I’m a paid gun. We think percentages. I don’t worship any frigging honour code. Lu was right about that. About me. I worship chances, edges, survival. We have a way out.’

‘No, Harlon,’ Ravenor sighed. ‘We’re done.’

Nayl glared at Ravenor. ‘We have a frigging way out!’ he insisted. ‘We still have one way out left to us.’ He nodded towards the door.

‘Absolutely not,’ said Angharad with a shudder. ‘You haven’t seen what’s through there.’

‘You have.’

‘That’s why I won’t go. It’s death.’

‘You survived it, lady.’

‘Barely.’

‘We can survive it together.’

‘It’s death, Harlon Nayl,’ she said flatly.

‘So is this,’ he said. ‘I’d rather die fighting for a chance than roll over and wait for death to get me.’

The Wych House shuddered again, and tilted more steeply. They had to hold on. Nayl looked down. Through the mesh of the platform he could see black water pouring up through the riser shaft to flood the floor space below them. Fires, caught by the swirling water, guttered and went out.

‘Last call,’ he said. ‘Who’s with me?’

Angharad raised her head and wiped the blood from her mouth. She drew her sword. ‘I am, I suppose,’ she said.

There was a long pause, broken only by the death throes explosions of the House. ‘So am I,’ said Ravenor. He turned his chair to face the housekeeper.

‘Come with us,’ he said.

The housekeeper nodded.

‘We need your key.’

The housekeeper nodded again.

‘What’s your name?’ Ravenor asked.

The housekeeper slowly lowered the hood of its gown. It was a she, a young girl barely into adolescence. Her face was thin, pale, and fringed by cropped, blonde hair. ‘I am Iosob,’ she said.

‘I am glad to know you, Iosob,’ Ravenor said. ‘Open the door for us.’

The girl raised her ancient key and fitted it into the lock. It turned, and the door opened. Nayl and Angharad stood beside her, weapons raised and

ready.

The door opened. Gunshot red sunlight glowed out. They all recoiled at the alien smell.

‘Let’s go, if we’re going,’ said Harlon Nayl, racking the slide of his shotgun.

They stepped through the door, and it slammed shut behind them.

A second later, the Wych House died.

THEY WERE BEING shaken around like beads in a drum. Thunderous water had entirely flooded the docking pool, but the upthrust of current was such that the underboat couldn’t right itself or dive. Twice, the boat slammed into the dock roof. Water seethed around them, aspirated, shimmering with bubbles. Kys, Plyton and Ballack had all been cut or bruised by impacts sustained from the underboat’s violent capture. Thonius, dead, as far as Kys was concerned, had fallen off his bench seat. He rolled, leaden, across the trunk flooring.

Only the pilot servitor, strapped into his chair, was intact.

‘Get us out!’ Kys yelled at him, holding on tight. ‘You wanted to get us out, so get us out!’

‘I can’t!’ the servitor wailed back, fighting with the helm controls. ‘The pressure wave coming in is too great! It’s forcing us up into the dock roof!’

The underboat heaved and slammed again. Warning lights lit up. Plyton was thrown the length of the trunk. Ballack, clinging grimly to handholds, blood pouring down his leg, stared at Kys.

‘Blow all the ballast,’ he suggested.

‘Would that work?’ Kys asked the pilot frantically.

‘Do I ask you how to do your job?’ the pilot snapped back. ‘No, it wouldn’t work!’

‘Ask him why,’ Ballack yelled.

‘Why?’ Kys relayed.

‘Because I’ve already blown the ballast,’ the pilot replied. ‘What am I, an amateur? I’m hardwired to drive underboats and I’m telling you, miss, that we’re—’

An upswell of water hit them and punched them into the dock roof so hard the hull buckled. Klaxons sang out, but they were all too busy falling and rolling. Kys landed on Ballack, who screamed in pain.

‘Oh good Throne—’ the pilot began. He had seen how fast and violently the needle of the depthmeter was spinning.

‘What?’ Kys demanded.

‘We’re dropping!’

With one last, aching shudder, the Wych House lost its grip on the ceiling of ice. It fell away in a huge, expanding cloud of ice particles and streaming, exhaling air. Legs flailing, it sank like a stone into the dark expanse of Wholly Water yawning below.

The darkness embraced it. Its superstructure began to crimp and crush with the pressure. Fluttering, winking trails of silver bubbles streamed up from its vents like contrails.

The falling House rotated, rolled, and inverted.

Upside down, the docking pool flushed out violently. The stricken underboat flew up out of the entry hatch like a cork.

‘Steady it, steady it!’ Kys yelled, holding tight to the seat back.

‘I’m trying!’ the pilot servitor cried. His augmented hands pulled at the steering controls. The ventral fans spun, floundering, drowning in the under-rip of the falling House. The pilot hit the cavitation drive.

The underboat struggled, dragged down, then turned its nose upwards. They shot up, like a released buoy, hull plates groaning and bending.

‘Where’s the House?’ Plyton asked, struggling into the pilot house. Kys shook her head. Far below, in the blackness, they glimpsed a falling structure that swiftly dropped out of sight into the abyss.

‘Auspex?’ Kys asked the pilot servitor.

He hit several switches.

The scanner system painted the descending House as a small yellow blip.
'Great Throne,' Ballack whispered. He had climbed in beside them, staring at the console.

The blip dropped away into the lower depths. It fizzled once, twice, and then vanished forever.

'Crushed by the pressure,' the pilot servitor said. 'It's gone.'

Kys sat back and began to cry.

No one said anything for a very long time.



FIVE

‘TELL ME AGAIN, slowly,’ said Kara Swole, ‘what happened when you went through this door.’

‘We were in the hellish red place at first,’ Ballack said. ‘It just had a feeling to it, a terrible feeling of menace. Then the housekeeper opened the door again, and we went through to a place that was near Dorsay, on Gudrun. But it wasn’t now, it was... the future. Many years in the future.’

‘This portal took you to different places and times?’ Kara asked cautiously, like a scholam tutor examining a pupil’s elaborate excuse for inconsistencies.

‘Yes,’ said Ballack. ‘It was a distressing and disorientating experience. The door was in control all the time. It made us wait while it opened, as if it was choosing what to show us next. That is how I understood it to work. You asked it a question, and it took you to places from which some answer or answers might be discerned. What those answers are, I believe, is very much a matter of interpretation.’

‘And then?’

‘And then it took us to another place. A rural field. I don’t know the time or the place. A man was waiting there for us. Ravenor went down and spoke with him, then he returned and told us we were going back.’

‘Who was the man?’ asked Kara.

‘It was the facilitator, Orfeo Culzean,’ said Ballack.

‘How do you know?’ asked Kara.

‘Ravenor told us.’

‘I don’t remember him saying anything of the sort,’ said Carl Thonius.

They looked around at him. Carl was sitting in the window seat of the Berynth’s apartment main room, huddled in blankets. His haggard face

was especially thin and pale, and discoloured by bruises and dozens of linear scabs. His voice was an unhealthy whisper.

‘My dear Carl,’ said Ballack gently, ‘you were quite agitated at the time. I doubt you remember much of anything.’

Thonius shrugged and looked away, out through the window. Once they’d got clear of the House, and there had been time to attend to him, Kys and Plyton had found Carl to be only superficially hurt, his face and body battered and scratched. His death-like state, from which he had gradually recovered, had been put down to severe shock.

‘Culzean,’ said Kara rising to her feet. ‘So he and Molotch were three steps ahead of us the whole while. It was all a trap, in other words, down to Worna being on hand to close the House down once you were in.’

‘It worked well, didn’t it?’ said Kys bitterly.

Kara took a deep breath. She had come down to the surface the moment Kys had restored contact. She could still not believe the news they had broken to her. Ravenor and Nayl, dead. Angharad too. Dead and gone. Everyone was numb. Grief would follow, later.

She looked around the room: Carl, the most physically hurt of them all, huddled in the window seat; Ballack by the fire, his ugly leg wound bound and strapped, a walking cane to hand; Maud Plyton in the corner, lost in her own thoughts, staring at the floor; Kys, standing by the door, head bowed, suffering the most intensely.

Kara stepped towards her and, not for the first time since their reunion, embraced her. They held onto each other for a moment. The two of them had lost the most. Gideon Ravenor and Harlon Nayl had been their true friends and comrades for a long time. Kara fought the urge to cry. She could feel the heat of sorrow rising. She held it back.

They all seemed to be looking to her now, the heart of the shattered group or, at least, what remained of it. Kys was too wrapped up in anguish and self-loathing to be a leader. More than once, as she had haltingly told Kara of Ravenor’s death, she had said, ‘I should have stayed with him. I left him behind.’

Kara let Kys go, and made her sit. She looked back at Ballack. 'The rest now. Let me hear it. I want to hear it.'

'We went back through the door. It took us to a hive somewhere, as if it was playing with us, refusing Ravenor's request to take us home. Then back to the red hell again. Once it had us there, it refused to open any more. That was Molotch's trap for us. I believe he may have commanded the door somehow to take us to that place and maroon us there where those things could find us and kill us. I would not put such a feat past Zygmunt Molotch.'

'Nor I,' said Carl. 'Except...'

'Except, Carl?' Kara asked.

'Why so elaborate? I know Molotch has a penchant for the baroque and theatrical, but why all that? Why take us to Culzean? Why arrange a meeting where they conversed for some minutes? Why not just kill us?'

'He wanted something from us,' said Kys, looking up. 'He wanted something from Ravenor. A deal, I think. Worna could have just killed us, but he was waiting for something. Waiting for... orders to kill us or spare us.'

'That's right,' said Plyton, speaking for the first time in hours. 'Lucic and the gunman holding me had a conversation to that effect. They were waiting for word to come. They were holding us until they knew if we could be friends or not.'

'Friends?' Kara echoed.

'I heard them say it,' said Plyton. 'That very word. The bounty hunter seemed to doubt it. I think he was pretty certain they'd just end up executing us. But from what's been said, I think it depended on Ravenor's answer to whatever this Culzean was offering.'

Kys shook her head. 'What in the name of Terra could Molotch and Culzean have been proffering that could have made us friends? I mean, what? What were they thinking? Ravenor would never side with Molotch, for any reason.'

'Well, he clearly said no,' said Thonius.

‘But there must have been a chance he’d say yes,’ said Kara, ‘or they wouldn’t have gone to all that effort.’

‘Whatever, he said no,’ Thonius snapped. ‘Which is why we were sent back into Molotch’s trap. That was his insurance, to wipe us out if Ravenor refused him.’

‘That’s when the door wouldn’t open?’ Kara asked Ballack. The interrogator smoothed back his long white hair and nodded. ‘And then the creatures came for us. I don’t know what they were. I have never even heard of their like. They were—’

‘Awful,’ said Thonius quietly. ‘Beautiful.’

‘That’s a strange choice of words,’ said Kys. ‘I saw them too, remember?’

‘So did I,’ shuddered Plyton. ‘They weren’t beautiful, they—’

‘Anything that is so immaculately designed to do what it does is beautiful,’ Thonius cut in. ‘They were the most terrifying things I have ever seen, but they were perfect too. Perfect killing machines, so driven and single-minded and pure.’

‘Pure evil,’ said Ballack.

‘Not even that,’ said Thonius. ‘Just pure. Just themselves. Hungry and alien, implacable. Utterly lacking in any emotional or intellectual quality we might recognise except ruthless, relentless hunger. I’d rather have tried to reason with an ork, or a scion of the Archenemy. At least they have needs and urges and ambitions, diction and intellect. At least there could be, however unlikely, a basis for dialogue. But those things... Molotch chose his assassins well.’

‘So the door was locked,’ Kara said to Ballack. ‘These things were upon you. I have to ask... how did you get out?’

Kys rose and walked into the adjacent room to pour herself a drink from the stand. Her nerves were shot but, more particularly, she didn’t want any of the others to see how incapable she was of controlling her tears. They streamed down her cheeks. Her body ached, and her hands shook as she selected a clean glass and filled it with amasec.

Gideon, I’m so sorry. I should not have left you.

Through the open door behind her, she heard Ballack's voice.

'We were overrun. It was a nightmare. We were seconds away from being torn to ribbons. Ravenor was waring me and Angharad. It was relentless, just a blur of instinct and frenzy. Then Carl fell to them. I thought he was dead for sure. I thought I was next.'

Kys sipped her drink, listening.

Ballack's voice had dropped low, and had become strained with emotion. 'There was... there was a sudden flash. Red light, red energy. I remembered thinking it was all red, but everything was already red in that place. This was intense and sudden, like a bomb going off. The energy flared like—'

'Like what?' Kys heard Kara ask.

'Like pain. Like rage. It tasted of rage and fury. I swear, it was a psychic event.'

'Ravenor.'

'No,' Ballack whispered. 'I don't think so. It didn't come from him. It was just there, a daemonic spasm from the depths of the immaterium. It lashed out, and burned the creatures off us. It threw them back, melted and twisted and broken. It saved us. It blew the door open, against the door's will.'

'Then what?'

'I don't remember. Just scraps, really. I remember staggering back through the door, still under Ravenor's control. I'd found Carl on the ground, surrounded by the slaughtered ruins of a dozen creatures. Ravenor willed me to pick him up, and of course I did.'

Kys walked back into the doorway. 'It *was* psychic,' she said. Kara looked around at her. 'I was in the theatre chamber when the door blew. Ballack is absolutely right. It was a psychic event. I felt it. I smelled it. It was raw and uncontrolled. It was feral. I assumed it was Ravenor's doing. I assumed it was his desperation.'

Kara nodded, adding as she did so, 'and then?'

‘Ravenor was wounded, dreadfully wounded,’ Kys said. ‘Ballack was out of it, conquered by pain. Carl was unconscious too. Ravenor told me to get them clear, to get them back to the underboat. He told me he would follow as soon as he had Angharad. And like a fool, I obeyed him. I took them, and I made my escape and I left Gideon there to die.’

She looked down at the drink in her hand and set it down. ‘Excuse me,’ she said, and walked towards to the apartment’s exit.

‘Patience,’ Kara called after her.

‘Not now, Kar,’ Kys replied, and slammed the hatch behind her.

There was a long silence. The fire guttered in the grate.

‘Kys will move past this in time,’ Ballack said. ‘She will accommodate this, and—’

‘Shut up, you ninker,’ Kara snapped. ‘You don’t know the first thing about what we—’

‘Kara,’ said Carl quietly.

Kara breathed in and out hard. ‘Forgive me, Ballack. This is a difficult time for us, and I shouldn’t have said that to you. I know you were only trying to help.’

‘It’s all right,’ said Ballack. ‘I’m aware I am an outsider here, new to this company. I should remember that.’

‘What happens now?’ asked Plyton. ‘I mean, apart from the fact that it’s over and everything?’

‘There may be some traces left here on Utochre of Molotch or Worna,’ said Ballack. ‘Some leads, some signs of their handiwork. They went to a lot of trouble setting this up.’

‘And if we find them?’ Kara asked.

‘Molotch is still out there,’ said Ballack. ‘Our mission is still not completed. If we can find a single lead, I say we use it. In Ravenor’s name, we use it. We track Molotch to ground and make him pay for what he has done.’

‘Closure?’ asked Kara.

‘Closure,’ Ballack agreed. ‘It’s all we have left. And it’s what Ravenor would have wanted.’

Kara nodded. Plyton shrugged, tears in her eyes, then nodded too.

‘It’s not at all what he’d have wanted,’ said Thonius, rising to his feet and dropping his blankets.

‘What?’

‘Come on,’ said Thonius, looking at Kara. ‘This is stupid. This is becoming mindless. We’ve torn ourselves apart hunting for this heretic, and still he eludes us. Maybe it’s time we recognised that he’s always going to beat us.’

‘No.’

‘Well, Kara Swole, I say yes,’ said Thonius. ‘And, funnily enough, I think I’m in charge here now. I am Ravenor’s interrogator. That gives me acting command in his... his absence. There is only one course of action left open to us now.’

‘And what might that be?’ asked Kara.

Thonius shrugged. ‘We should go directly to Thracian Primaris and present ourselves to the High Conclave of the Ordos Helican. We should make full account of our misadventure, in all detail, and throw ourselves upon the mercy of Lord Rorken.’

‘No,’ said Kara.

‘Again, yes, Kara,’ Thonius said, clearly and precisely. ‘We broke all the rules, and we still failed. I doubt very much I’ve got a career left, but I know what’s right. Ravenor should have done this months ago. It behoves us to make amends and start repairing the damage we have done. Even if it means we offer ourselves up to the most stringent discipline of the Inquisition.’

He limped across the room, picked up Kys’s abandoned drink, and knocked it back. ‘Let’s pack up and make our way as penitents. Let’s try to make good the wrong we have wrought. It’s too late to even think otherwise.’

GIDEON, I'M SO sorry. I should not have left you.

Two floors down from the apartment, Kys sat alone in the dim stairwell of the ancient building and wept. Two floors down was as far as she'd got after storming out. She'd been intending to find a saloon or a bar, to purchase a drink, and maybe get into a pointless argument or a fight. But her legs had failed, and she'd sat down on the worn wooden steps.

Ravenor was gone. Ravenor was dead. Harlon was dead. Nothing would ever be the same again. Ever.

She heard footsteps coming up the stairwell below her. A resident of the block, perhaps. She ignored the approach, hoping whoever it was would step by her and leave her be, perhaps mistaking her for some stack wretch who'd come into the building to attempt begging.

The footsteps came closer. Someone sat down on the stairs beside her.

'I... I am abjectly aloof for any words to make fulsome expression,' said Sholto Unwerth.

Kys laughed despite herself. 'Where did you come from?'

'I was, foremost, checking of the lander, so that with all convenientness, it might be ready to take us aloft.'

'Is it ready?'

'It is, Patience.'

He reached into his pocket and offered her a handkerchief. 'Avoid that part,' he said, indicating, 'for I may have subsequently blown on it. The rest is quite fresh.'

'Don't look at me,' she said, her eyes streaming. 'I have snot coming out of my nose.'

'It is quite dark,' he said, looking around. 'I can define little of your mucus, so modestly is assured.'

She laughed again.

'Is it true?' he asked.

She nodded and blew her nose.

'Well, I am five saken,' he said.

‘Five?’

‘It is one more than four saken.’ he replied. ‘It is a level of grief behind which there is no furthestmost.’

‘Except six?’

‘Pray no one ever experiences six saken,’ Unwerth said. She could see he had small tears in his eyes.

‘I am pre-empt,’ he said quietly. ‘I am stricken. I am beside yourself.’

‘I’m glad of that,’ she said.

‘He was a good man, as floating chairs go,’ said Unwerth.

‘He was.’

‘I think he likened of me, to the end, and made his trust upon me, in some measuring. I hope so.’

‘I believe he did, Sholto. Gideon would not have kept in your company if he didn’t trust you.’

‘Well, I had a ship, and I was excrescently pliantable,’ Unwerth countered.

‘There is that.’

Unwerth frowned thoughtfully. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

‘I will be.’

Unbidden, he curled his short arms up around her shoulders and pulled her tight.

‘You will, indeed, be,’ he said.

‘Sholto,’ Kys said, sniffing comforted by his little embrace. ‘He was there. I saw him.’

‘Who?’

She nodded. ‘The man who hurt you. Lucius Worna. He nearly killed me. I nearly killed him. I wish I had, for your sake. I would have done it, but he had the drop on me and teleported away. He—’

She paused.

‘What?’ Unwerth asked.

‘He teleported away,’ Kys whispered with growing realisation. ‘He called to Siskind and teleported away.’

She broke the embrace. ‘Siskind. Siskind! It’s got to be the same Siskind, hasn’t it? The *Allure*’s here. Throne, why didn’t I connect this before? The *Allure*’s here!’

She got up, and turned back up the stairs.

‘Can you scan for it?’ she asked as she ran.

‘It will be of signficated disguise,’ he said, scrambling after her. ‘But I know its particulates. Its draft and measure, its signature. The *Arethusa* can match its pattern.’

‘Come on! Can’t you run any faster?’

‘There is a bigness to these stairs that I am not as copius with as your long leggage!’

‘Do you want me to carry you?’ she snapped.

He stopped. She stopped too, and looked back at him.

‘That would just be undignified, wouldn’t it?’ she said.

‘Incandescently,’ he replied.



SIX

RED HEAT. AGAIN, the gunshot sun.

The area around the lonely door is heaped with the mangled corpses of the black and white organisms.

I feel some pride that we managed to slay so many. Most of this was Angharad's work.

There is no sign of life, but there is still the sense of dread, the shadow in the warp. I am trusting that the door will allow us to step away from this place. We cannot stay here long.

Angharad feels it. She watches the horizon, Evisorex angled in her grip. She is exhausted. She will not withstand another clash like the one we have just been through.

Nayl feels it too, coming new to this experience of stepping into another time-place. He raises his weapon, tense suddenly.

He was right. This is the only option. Staying in the House to die along with it would have been the decision of one foolish and weak.

I am weary and I am wounded, but I am not foolish and I am not weak. Not yet. Soon, perhaps. The damage I have sustained to my support systems, the leakage of fluid, may be critical. I believe I am already dying. Worse, my mind is frail and utterly incapable of defending us. Every movement is an effort to me.

'What happens now?' Nayl asks me, nervously.

'We wait,' I tell him, trying to hide from him how useless I am.

'For how long?'

'For however long it takes.'

'They're coming,' says Angharad, the Carthaen steel bristling in her fists. 'Evisorex thirsts.'

‘I’m sure it does,’ I reply. I look at Iosob, the child, the housekeeper. She is afraid. Things have never gone this way for her before.

‘Iosob?’

She fumbles with the key. ‘We wait.’

‘And then?’

‘Then the key may turn. But the door locked us here before. Your enemy... what was his name?’

‘Molotch?’

‘Molotch. He made adjustments to the door. He prepared it. It may not open again. He was very knowledgeable.’

I look out at the black headland of volcanic rock Angharad is watching.

‘What else do you know about him?’ I ask.

‘Nothing,’ Iosob says. ‘He came, he contained us. He killed some of the housekeepers to make his point. He was very skilled in his work.’

‘I have some skills of my own,’ I say.

‘But you no longer have the daemon.’

‘What?’

‘The daemon. The daemon that saved us, when the hooked things came the first time. It drove them back, and threw the door wide open. I assumed it was your daemon.’

‘You are mistaken. I don’t own a daemon,’ I reply. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The House knows,’ she says. ‘You brought a daemon in here with you, last time. A howling fury of the warp. It is the only reason you survived.’

‘What the hell is she talking about?’ Nayl asks.

‘Iosob, what do you mean?’ I feel she is terribly confused, her memory of the traumatic incident patchy. Perhaps she mistook my mental powers for something darker.

Iosob looks away at the black outcrop, scared. ‘They’re coming again, Gideon who is Ravenor.’

‘Last time, you called them *the Great Devourer*, Iosob. I heard you. What are they?’

‘They are the future. Passing through the three-way door, we have seen them several times. Three hundred years from our now, they will come. Behemoth.’

‘What is Behemoth?’

‘Behemoth, Kraken, Leviathan.’

‘Iosob?’

She whimpers and drops the key. She bends down and searches for it in the dust.

‘The Imperium will shake. They will be the worst enemies mankind has ever faced.’

‘What are they called?’ I ask.

‘They don’t have a name yet,’ she replies, ‘not yet.’ She finds the key and rises again.

‘This is the future, then?’ I ask.

‘This is what the door shows. Three, four hundred years gone by from our now. This is what we have seen, sometimes.’

She glances around. ‘Oh, they’re coming back.’

‘The child is right,’ grunts Angharad.

‘I’ve got eighteen shells in this pump-shot,’ says Nayl. ‘What happens when they’re spent?’

‘Try the door, please, Iosob.’ I instruct. I look back at Nayl. ‘I have a feeling, Harlon, that just after you expend your seventeenth round, you’re going to wish you had stayed aboard the Wych House and died.’

‘Charming,’ he replies. ‘I can always count on you for a positive spin.’

Iosob tries the key in the lock. It refuses to turn.

‘The door is not ready,’ she tells me. ‘Or, well, it may not ever be ready.’

‘Keep trying the key, please.’

I wait. Nayl strides around me. ‘Gideon,’ he asks, ‘if the Wych House dies, how long will this damn door last?’

‘I don’t know. If it was anchored to the House, not long. I’m hoping, praying, it exists beyond the House’s dimensions.’

‘Well, that’s a relief,’ he mocks.

‘Ravenor!’ Angharad is alert suddenly. I turn and see what she has seen: a dust cloud rising above the black volcanic outcrop. It drifts slowly, a yellow oblong smudge.

‘More of them!’

‘Please, Iosob try the key again.’

This time, miraculously, it turns. The door opens.

THE DOOR OPENS three times, in fact. To an empty, windblown steppe; to a hazed plain of duricrust under a night sky where what can only be the Eye of Terror swirls and crackles like a diseased sun; and then to a forest of white, glassy trees beside a green-black lake.

There is no immediate threat here, no sense of doom, no trace of life apart from the curious trees and small, pale wasps.

We rest there, just for an hour or two. We have to keep going, for I cannot tell how long we will have use of the door, or how many times we will have to walk through it before we find a time and place remotely connected to our origin.

But we can only go on if we rest first. We have no food, and cannot trust the lake’s water. I test it with my systems, and find it is unpotable. It isn’t even water.

Angharad lies down and sleeps. So does the housekeeper, her small head resting against the trunk of a glassy tree. Nayl paces up and down.

It is cold. Up through the white branches of the trees, the sky is a silky grey, and sprinkled with star systems I don’t know. How far away are we, I wonder? How many parsecs, how many years? Is this even our galaxy?

I try to rest my mind, and soothe it with psykana rituals, probing it for damage, cleansing it of fatigue. Meditation may restore some of my strength.

But I am aware of my body, I am aware of physicality, my shrunken form, cold and helpless and dense inside the chair. These are sensations the chair usually spares me.

I consider again what Iosob said. What daemon did she think she saw? If there is any truth to her words, I have one suspicion, one I cannot do anything about.

In extremis, when I had to ware him, there was something artificial in Ballack's head that previous scans had not shown to me. To ware someone, though, gives a different, deeper insight. At the time, I had been far too busy – far too frantic – to pay it much heed, but now in quiet reflection, I remember it.

It was a block. A baffle, artificially imposed, almost undetectable, a very sophisticated piece of psychic architecture. It was designed to keep a part of Ballack's mind invisible to me. I have seen the type of thing before in my life, most particularly in a technique honed by the Cognitae, which they called the Black Dam.

What was he hiding behind it? What was his connection to the noetic school? Did he install the dam himself, or was it placed there without his knowledge by someone else?

Was it Ballack who left a footprint on Maud Plyton's psyche?

Has Ballack been hiding a daemon in his mind all along?

'GIDEON?' NAYL TOOK a step closer to the silent chair. The surface of it was scratched and battered, with a patina that looked as if it had been sandblasted. Congealed fluid clogged some of the deeper gouges.

'Gideon?'

'Harlon?' Ravenor's voxsponder wheezed and replied.

'Were you asleep?'

'I think so. I think I must have been.'

'Ah, sorry. It's hard to tell.' Nayl looked around. Angharad was curled up and slumbering like a cat. The housekeeper looked like a lost child, huddled in a storybook woodland. 'It's been about three hours. Actually,

that's a guess, because my chron is acting really funny but my gut says three hours.' He glanced at the sky. 'And it's getting darker and colder.'

'We should use the door again,' said Ravenor.

'Do you think it really will take us home?' he asked.

'I doubt we'll get anything as precise as that,' said Ravenor. 'I'm hoping for a recognisable Imperial location, even a remote one or a ship, within five years either way of our exit point.'

'Five years?' Nayl asked, doubtfully. 'As much as that?'

'If we get as close as that, I'll be content,' Ravenor replied. 'I'm rather afraid the door's operating system is impaired. It's no longer opening in response to a question of coherence. I think we're travelling at random. I'm not even sure that the locations it's opening for us are going to be compatible with human forms.'

Nayl raised his eyebrows. 'That's a nice thought I hadn't yet considered. So the next time we open the door, it could lead to... what? An airless world? A toxic atmosphere?'

'The open void. The warp. The heart of a star. Or back to the Wych House. This escape route comes with no guarantee it is an escape route at all. We may have simply postponed our fate. In the light of that, I'm sure you'll agree, five years and a few light years out would be something of a miracle.'

Nayl nodded thoughtfully. 'You never did tell me if you got an answer,' he said.

'I got part of one. The door took me to Molotch, or to the world where he was hiding, at least.'

'Where was that?'

'There was no way to tell. Orfeo Culzean was waiting for me there.'

'To kill you?'

'To talk to me.'

'You're joking!' Nayl laughed.

‘He had a proposition. He wanted to make a pact with me. It seems he and Molotch are deeply concerned about Slyte.’

Nayl rubbed the bruises Worna’s hand had left on his throat. ‘Slyte?’

‘Culzean was suggesting that Molotch and I worked together to combat Slyte. He wanted us to put an end to our fight and work in unison against a mutual enemy. I said no.’

Ravenor fell silent. He had no intention of telling Nayl the details of the conversation.

‘If you’d said yes?’ Nayl asked.

‘Culzean would have sent us back through the door, and Worna would have conveyed us off Utochre to where ever Molotch was waiting. Because I said no, he used the door as a murder weapon.’

‘I thought the Slyte business was over. I thought we’d gone past the critical point. What does Molotch know that we don’t?’

‘Perhaps nothing. We may know more about it than him. He may not be aware that the critical point, as you put it, has passed.’

‘I doubt that,’ said Nayl. ‘Since when has he ever known less than us?’

‘Wake the others,’ Ravenor said.

THE NEXT TURN of the key brought them out onto a ragged plateau of ancient, crumbling granite. Extreme age had caused the rock to rot and lose its constitution. Beyond the plateau, a ragged world stretched away under a sky threaded by blinking whiskers of lightning.

The next opened the door to a fogbound marsh. It was humid, and the air was bad. So was the standing water. Thread-thin worms writhed in the mire, pulsing their wretched mouths and firing millivolt electrical impulses that prickled at the travellers’ legs as they waded around.

The door opened and closed behind them again. A vast rift valley of yellow rock, gouged out under a selpic blue sky, spread out in front of them. The valley was ten kilometres wide, and four or five deep. It was aching hot, and the heat was dry. The air smelled like metal.

‘Leave this place quickly,’ Ravenor said. His chair systems were reading a blaze of solar radiation.

Next, a small coral atoll in the middle of a choppy ocean washed violet by small, wobbling jellyfish in vast profusion. There was no other land in sight. The sky was a pink haze. A booming sound kept echoing out across the distance. Very far away, indistinct in the haze, some great, basking shape rose from the sea and rolled slowly back in.

‘Next,’ said Nayl.

Next was a dark, black forest, bitter and damp. The air hinted at advanced decay, and the merest pricks of white sky penetrated the thick, black fronds of the trees. They moved a little way from the door, hoping to see signs of habitation or perhaps a trail. Odd sounds knocked and chirruped in the darkness. Tiny black flies began to buzz around them. Angharad brushed them away from her face. They were very small, like fleas.

In a few seconds, the clouds of them had become unbearably thick, blackening exposed skin and swirling into nostrils, ears and eyes.

‘Exit!’ Ravenor ordered. Iosob struggled with the key, moaning through tightly pursed lips as she tried to shake off the flies.

Ravenor summoned a little of what was left of his will and let it wash out, sweeping the flies away for a second.

The door opened.

Here, a bone yard, a windy, cold desert of blue-grey dust. The chasing wind fanned horsetails of loose dust off the tops of dunes. The vast, dry bones of long dead animals covered the landscape as far as they could see, tumbled in disarticulated heaps, half submerged in the dust. These animals had been giants. The sky was a mottled brown, and the las-fire streaks of shooting stars, all descending at the same forty-five degree angle, flickered across it like sparks off a grinding wheel. Ravenor’s three companions crunched out amongst the bone waste, spitting phlegm black with dead flies out of their mouths.

‘Open the door again,’ said Angharad, humourlessly.

Iosob obeyed, and they came into a city. It was a frigid, bare place of cyclopean blocks under a yellow sky dominated by a ringed gas giant. There was little doubt at all that the city was not of human construction.

‘Have you seen anything like this before?’ Nayl asked. Sound had a strange, hollow echo to it. The cold air held a sweet tang, like sugar.

‘No,’ said Ravenor. They wandered the area around the door for five minutes.

‘It’s been dead a long time, hasn’t it?’ asked Angharad.

‘No,’ said Ravenor. ‘I can feel something here, a presence.’

Nayl raised his gun.

‘It’s far away,’ said Ravenor, ‘but I can feel it. It’s not human.’ He turned his chair. ‘Open the door again, please, Iosob. I don’t think we’re safe here.’

As they went through the door, Nayl wondered quite what Ravenor had felt to make him so sure of that.

The next place was an arid plain, cracked and shrunken like sun-damaged skin. Weird succulent plant growth, like sprouts of brain tissue, formed forests on either side of the parched plain. A few kilometres away, the rusted, buckled shell of some colossal machine lay derelict on the ground. It looked like part of a starship, but what kind they couldn’t tell. There was no time to debate or investigate. The atmosphere was barely breathable. Nausea enveloped them, and they started to gasp and choke.

It seemed to take forever for the key to turn.

‘Throne!’ Nayl exclaimed as they made their next exit. ‘Be careful! Watch your step!’

The door had opened onto a narrow platform of rough-hewn, untreated wood. It was part of a massive, and not altogether reliable-looking, matrix of scaffolding erected around a huge, decaying ouslite tower. They were close to the top, in bright midday sunlight and fresh wind, and the platform was a thousand metres above the hazy sprawl of a huge city. Hundreds of dirty smoke trails rose from the city roofscape.

The platform swayed as they moved gingerly out across it. Iosob held onto a scaffold cross-member and refused to look down. She shut her eyes.

‘I don’t like this,’ she said.

‘Do we climb down?’ asked Angharad, blithely standing on the edge and staring down, her hands on her hips. ‘There is life here. I can hear it. Bustle. There is movement in the streets. Teeming life. It looks like an Imperial city.’

‘I think we would regret doing that,’ said Ravenor. ‘It’s teeming with life, all right, but I’m not reading human minds anywhere. I think this *was* an Imperial city once.’

‘So who’s down there now?’ asked Nayl. ‘And might they not at least have things like water and food?’

The towers and buildings nearest to them, none as tall as their vantage place, were also in bad repair and strung with complex networks of primitive scaffolding. It was hard to tell if the city was being repaired or dismantled by its new owners.

Angharad’s keen eyes picked out figures moving on the scaffolding on a neighbouring tower, four hundred metres below them: labourers, at work.

‘Ravenor is right. There’s no point climbing down.’

‘What can you see?’ Nayl asked.

‘Orks,’ she replied mildly.

When the door opened next, it was into a black space. There was no light whatsoever, just cold, musty air.

‘Gideon?’ Nayl called out.

Ravenor ignited his chair’s lamp systems. His power was alarmingly low, because the lamps did not blaze with their usual white intensity. The yellow glow revealed their surroundings: a stone chamber, rectangular, about the size of the *Arethusa*’s secondary hold. Walls, floor and ceiling were made of the same, flush-fitting stone blocks, expertly built and, though there were no signs of wear or decay or even dust, very old.

‘There’s no door,’ said Angharad.

‘Ah, you noticed that,’ said Nayl.

‘I mean, no other door,’ she said. ‘Unless it is concealed.’

‘It isn’t,’ Ravenor said. ‘I have scanned. The chamber is sealed and solid.’

‘Why would someone build it, then? For what purpose, if you can’t get in and out of it?’

‘Maybe *they* can,’ said Ravenor. ‘Maybe they have a teleport. Maybe they don’t want to come in here. Maybe it’s sealed to keep something in.’

‘But there’s nothing in here except us,’ said Nayl. He looked at Ravenor sharply. ‘Is there?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Door!’ Angharad declared.

‘We could at least rest here for a few minutes.’ said Ravenor. ‘It has the merit of being free from the sort of health hazards we’ve found elsewhere.’

They sat down beside his chair and stared at the door.

‘Iosob,’ said Ravenor, after a while, ‘I’ve been thinking about the door. It’s operating randomly, isn’t it?’

She shrugged. ‘I do not know. That is not my function. But I think that’s very likely.’

‘Without the House to anchor it, the door is cut loose, directionless?’

She shrugged again. ‘That is not—’

‘-your function, I know. How old are you, Iosob?’

‘Fourteen years.’

‘You were raised in the House?’

‘I was raised by the family of housekeepers to be a housekeeper, as my mothers before me.’

‘And you’re not psychically active in any way?’

‘I don’t believe I am. How would I know?’

Ravenor was already pretty certain. He had gently scanned her several times, and found no trace. Her mind, indeed, seemed a strangely lonely,

unhappy place, empty of the usual buzz of thoughts. ‘None of the housekeepers were psykers, were they?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘Is that important?’ Nayl asked.

‘However the door operates,’ Ravenor said, ‘it involves a strong psychic process. I don’t know if the House was doing that, or someone we never met. The housekeepers are not active, because active psykers would have interfered with the door’s operation. In fact, I think they were brought up under very particular circumstances, extensive ritual conditioning to keep their minds very... calm.’ He had been going to say ‘vacant’, but didn’t want to in front of Iosob.

‘With the House gone,’ Ravenor said, ‘I was wondering if I could start to influence it. I was wondering if my mind could engage with it enough to guide us.’

They got back on their feet.

Ravenor reached out and probed the door the way he would a living mind. He felt foolish doing it, for although the door had an undeniable background vibration of power, it was just a wooden door.

‘Our most immediate concern is thirst,’ said Ravenor. ‘Open the door.’



SEVEN

THEY STEPPED THROUGH into a blustery, fresh, cold wind. They were in a rocky foreshore, a strand of limestone with a crashing grey sea on one side and a range of low cliffs on the other. A low sky full of murky clouds was racing past at what seemed an abnormally fast rate. There was moisture in the wind, and the bluster was raising eddies of chasing spray off the wet rock.

‘You found water,’ said Nayl. He nodded towards the breaking sea fifty metres away, ‘but unless that’s freshwater...’

‘It isn’t,’ said Angharad. ‘You can taste the brine in the air.’

She paused. ‘Step towards me slowly, Nayl.’

‘What?’

+Do as she says.+

Ten metres behind Nayl, what they had taken to be a slab of wet rock had stirred. It was an immense, pallid crocodilian creature with a long, slender snout. It had been basking on the foreshore in the ocean spray. It raised its broad body on four large flipper limbs, and slithered lazily down towards the water.

They looked around and saw there were a great number of the things, camouflaged into the grey limestone, basking in colonies all along the chilly shore. Some lay with their mouths wide open. They seemed languid, and not the least interested in the visitors.

‘Think there’s more than eighteen of them?’ Nayl asked.

‘W-why?’ asked Iosob, gazing in some trepidation at the landscape of monsters.

Nayl patted his shotgun. He looked at Ravenor. ‘What do you think? Is this a near miss? Or did you get the door to find us water?’

‘It’s probably a coincidence,’ Ravenor replied. ‘Let’s try again.’

There was a soft, crumping boom of thunder, and it began to rain, a few large drops at first, and then a sustained, torrential downpour of monsoon proportions. They were all drenched in an instant.

‘That’s fresh!’ Nayl shouted. He tilted his head back and opened his mouth. ‘Throne be, that’s fresh!’ Angharad and Iosob were already drinking in the rain. Iosob cupped her hands and lapped from them as they rapidly filled. With head tilted back, it was impossible not to drink down whole mouthfuls.

Ravenor opened the catchment vents on his chair and collected what water he could from the gulleys of the hull. Even a little would help restore the fluid balance of his support systems.

The rain stopped as quickly as it had begun. Nayl wiped his hand across his wet face and laughed out loud. ‘It was worth coming here after all,’ he said.

I SETTLE MY mind for another attempt. I am becoming increasingly fatigued. My concerns about my own deterioration are grave. I believe the support chair’s damaged systems are shutting down, and without them, my life will become untenable. I have hidden this from the others, although I suspect Harlon has some idea.

I focus on the door, and on the key in Iosob’s hand. I wish I understood the arcane mechanisms of the three-way door better, for blind meddling with such powerful artefacts is usually extremely inadvisable.

I try to connect anyway. I try to make the door, or some sentience beyond its physical substance, understand what I need from it. This time I concentrate my thoughts on memories on the *Arethusia*. If there is a place I could wish us to be, it is there.

I think of the *Arethusia*. I think of the year 404. Will it comprehend me? Will it be able to act upon that comprehension? I told it *thirst*, and it brought us to water, if only in the most tenuous sense.

‘Open the door.’

A WARM, DUSTY wind blew into their faces. A hard sun beat down from a cloudless sky. The door stood in a thicket of odd, twisted thorn brush, hard as bone and twice as tall as a fully grown man. The brush was gnarled and wrinkled, powder grey on its bark, and its thorns were long and sharp.

‘Is this what you were trying for?’ Nayl asked.

‘No,’ said Ravenor, gliding out of the doorway behind him. ‘Not at all.’

‘We take a look around?’ asked Nayl. ‘Seeing as we’re here?’ They moved away from the door, following the dusty slope up through the tangled brush. The wind was only light, but the brush seemed to move and creak around them. ‘Not liking the plant life much,’ muttered Nayl.

‘It’s only plants,’ said Angharad. ‘Plants cannot kill you.’

‘Well, let me put the lie to that,’ Nayl began. ‘I was in this place once—’

‘Shut up,’ said Ravenor. He was so weary, it was an effort even to be polite. Disappointment was suffocating him.

‘What’s that?’ asked Angharad, pointing ahead of them. They could glimpse some structure, like a derrick or mast, rising from above the brush cover at the top of the slope.

‘Let’s find out,’ said Nayl. ‘Look, ahead of us, the thorn scrub thins out.’

They advanced, toiling up the slope, ducking under the spiked boughs. The thorn thicket came to an abrupt halt in a ragged line. Beyond it, the rising land had been cleared for several hundred metres. The earth looked scorched, as if flamers had been used to burn back the resilient brush.

‘Look at that,’ said Nayl.

Clear of the scrub, they had a good view up the slope to the crown of the hill, where a drab, uninviting compound had been constructed. The compound was surrounded by a high security fence, and the summit of the hill had been entirely denuded of thorn brush within three hundred metres of the fence line. Inside the fence lay a complex of modular buildings surrounding several tall masts.

The masts were high gain vox antennae. The modular buildings were of a recognisably Imperial template.

‘It’s not home, but it’s the best break we’ve had so far,’ Nayl murmured.

‘We will approach?’ asked Angharad.

‘Yes,’ said Ravenor. ‘I’m reading human mind patterns, but they’re oddly dulled. I can’t fix numbers or much thought detail.’

Why?’ asked Nayl.

‘I’m... I’m having trouble concentrating,’ said Ravenor. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Are you in pain, Gideon?’ Nayl asked.

‘Let that be my problem, Harlon.’ The chair moved forwards. They began to follow it up the cleared slope. A voice suddenly rang out, distorted by vox speakers, and stopped them in their tracks.

Three humans were trudging up the slope behind them from the brush. They were male, clad in dusty Guard-issue uniforms that had been heavily reinforced with chainmail and shielding plates. They wore heavy, full-visored helmets like pit fighters. The visor plates, like the shielding they wore, were scratched and shabby. All three of them were aiming heavy, dirty flamers.

‘Stay where you are,’ ordered one of them. His voice crackled out of his helmet relay. He gestured with his flamer. ‘Where the hell did you come from?’

Nayl gestured honestly at the brush cover behind them.

‘Some kind of joker?’ asked another of the men.

‘Where’s your ship?’ demanded the leader. ‘We didn’t see any ship come in. Where did you set down?’

‘We didn’t come in a ship,’ said Ravenor through his voxsponder. He was alarmed that he hadn’t been forewarned of their approach, but much more alarmed that, now they were visible, he couldn’t read their minds at all.

The men stared at Ravenor’s chair.

‘What is that?’ asked the leader.

‘A support chair.’ said Nayl.

‘For a cripple?’

‘Yes.’ said Ravenor.

The trio circled around them. ‘Let’s lose the shotgun,’ one told Nayl. Nayl tossed it into the dust obligingly.

‘And the sword, you,’ another said to Angharad. The three men seemed particularly fascinated by the towering woman in her torn leather armour.

‘I will not draw it, for I have no intention of harming you,’ Angharad replied clearly. ‘But I will not be divorced from Evisorex.’

Iosob jumped and squealed as the leader of the trio fired his flamer at the ground in a roaring gale of heat. Burned dust billowed up from the vitrified scorch mark.

‘Drop the bloody sword,’ the leader said.

‘Do it,’ Nayl hissed sidelong at Angharad. ‘I understand your code, woman, but we’ve come too far – and I mean too very far – for you to screw this up.’

With an expression on her face like she was sawing off her own arm, Angharad unbuckled the steel’s long case and lowered it respectfully into the dust.

‘Burn gang two chief to base,’ they heard the leader vox.

‘Come back, BG3,’ the link crackled.

‘Turn out a security squad to the main gates and meet us there. We’re coming in. Tell the boss she won’t believe what we’ve just found out here.’

THE ROOM IN the modular shelter was cool and quiet, air circulating through well-maintained vent systems. There was a steel table, and half a dozen folding chairs. Nayl sat down on one, and sighed, bone-tired. Iosob sat on the floor at his feet, and curled up.

Angharad paced. She was visibly agitated at having her steel taken from her against her will.

Ravenor lowered his chair onto the deck to conserve power, and rested. Watching him, Nayl was concerned for his master’s well-being. Fluid had begun to leak from the gouges in the chair again, and this time it was running dark and unclear, as if dirt or biological waste was mixing with the chair’s circulation system.

The trio of chainmailed troopers had led them up to the compound gates, one of them lugging the shotgun and the sword. A squad of regular Imperial Guard had assembled to meet them. They carried bull pup-format lasguns, and wore more standard combat fatigues, lacking the mail and plate armour of the flamer team. Nayl hadn't been able to recognise the regimental insignia.

The men wore helmets, but their faces were bare except for dust goggles. They had stared in complete incomprehension at the prisoners being brought in. Nayl had wondered if it was because of the odd mix of them – a towering Amazon with sullen eyes and leather bodywear ripped in places to reveal toned skin scabbed with scratches, a barely pubescent girl in a robe, a crippled freak in a floating chair, and a bald bruiser in bodygloving that had seen better days. He had a nasty feeling they were simply baffled at seeing any visitors at all.

+I can't read any of them at all,+ Ravenor had sent.+Cough if you hear this, Nayl.+

Nayl had coughed.

+Then my mind's not totally useless. They must be blocked.+

The squad had brought them into the module chamber, and locked the hatch. Ten minutes passed.

Nayl got up off his chair and moved to peer out of one of the small, recessed windows.

'Listening station, you think?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Ravenor, his voice just a dry wheeze, like an asthmatic whisper.

'I thought so. From those masts. High security in places like this. No wonder they weren't too happy to see us strolling around. You know the regiment flashes, by the way?'

'No,' said Ravenor.

Nayl shrugged. 'Me neither. Are you sure you're coping, Gideon?'

'I have had better days. Listen to me... we may have walked into trouble here. A high security zone, as you said. I will try to talk us out of this,

because it is our best chance of salvation. It is the only hope of escape the door has offered us so far. Imperial contact. Please follow my lead. Do not do anything... provocative.'

'Hey,' said Nayl, with an open handed shrug.

'I meant Angharad specifically.'

'I understand,' the Carthaen snapped. 'But Evisorex needs me and—'

'Evisorex can sit and wait, Angharad. For Throne's sake—' Ravenor's voxsponder suddenly cut off, and the monotone voice pattern was lost in a series of strangulated gulps and rattles.

Nayl hurried to the chair. He realised the sounds were coughing, or even choking.

'Gideon?'

'What's wrong with him?' asked Angharad, with a tone that suggested she didn't really care how much Ravenor suffered.

'Frig, I don't know. I know he was hurt bad. Oh, Throne—'

Nayl took a hand away from the chair's side. It was smeared with blood. Blood was weeping out of the puncture marks the hook-limbed monsters had punched into its casing.

'I think he's dying in there.'

+You are quite probably correct.+

'Gideon?'

+I think we've known each other long enough for me to be honest with you, Harlon.+

'I would hope that to be true.'

+I could put up a brave front, and try to keep being the strong leader, but I am not feeling so very strong any more. My support systems are close to shut down. When they are gone, my body will start to die. Furthermore, I believe I may have sustained physical injury. A wound, maybe more than one. I cannot tell, because my chair's medical supervision system has cut out. My voxsponder also just malfunctioned. I am attempting system repairs to it.+

‘So I have to do the talking?’

+For now. These people seem blocked to my mind. That may be because of my reduced performance, but I think they’re properly blocked. I need you to—+

‘Shhhhhh!’ said Nayl.

The chamber door had just opened. Two troopers entered, and were followed by a small, brunette woman in the uniform of a Guard colonel. She was strong-featured, and almost attractive, although her face was lined and worn by years of care and sunlight. She gave a nod, and one of the troopers closed the door.

The woman walked around and sat down behind the table. She regarded her four detainees.

+I can’t read her either, Harlon. She’s blocked too.+

Nayl rose from beside the chair and faced the seated woman.

‘I’m sorry for this trouble, ma’am,’ he said. ‘My name is Harlon Nayl. I am an accredited bounty hunter, carrying license to hunt in the Scarus, Electif and Borodance sectors.’

‘That’s an interesting series of lies,’ the woman replied with a husky voice, ‘or at least unlikely, considering how far away those sectors lie.’

‘May I ask, ma’am, where we are?’

She hesitated, with a confused smirk. ‘Are you telling me you don’t know?’

‘Would I ask such a stupid question if I did?’

‘I suppose not. This is Rahjez.’

‘I don’t know it.’

+Please, Harlon, be careful what you say.+

‘I’m interested... how could you be on a world,’ asked the woman, ‘without the slightest knowledge of where it is?’

‘I could tell you a story about how I was kidnapped by slavers, and made my escape along with these three companions, landing on a world I had no way of identifying.’

‘Would that story be true?’ she asked mildly.

‘Look at me. Look at the three people I’m travelling with. Are we remotely... likely? Don’t we look like escapees from a slaver ship?’

‘That makes more immediate sense than the suspicions I have.’

‘What might they be?’

‘That you’re spies. Good spies disguise themselves in the most unlikely ways, in my experience.’

Nayl nodded towards Angharad, aloof at the back of the room. ‘Look at her. Built for fighting. That’s why the slavers chose her. Good breeding stock for the arenas.’

‘I am not good breeding stock for—’

‘+Shut. Up. Angharad.+’

‘But the slavers, they obviously saw that in me,’ Angharad added.

‘Slavers?’ asked the woman. ‘We haven’t had slaver activity since... when did we last have slaver activity in this sub, Kerter?’

‘Never,’ answered one of the troopers.

‘Do spies just walk out into the open to get captured?’ asked Nayl.

‘They might,’ the woman said. ‘It rather depends on their agenda.’

Nayl shrugged and risked a smile at the woman. ‘This isn’t going well, is it?’

‘I’d say not.’ The woman rose. ‘I am obliged to tell you that I am Colonel Asa Lang, in operational command of this station, and that’s all I am obliged to tell you. You are prisoners of war.’

‘There’s a war?’

‘Oh, please,’ Lang replied.

‘Are you obliged to offer us aid?’ Nayl asked.

‘What kind of aid?’

‘Water would be nice. We haven’t had liquid in a while, or food. The kid there is suffering. Medicae aid would be nice too. My... acquaintance Gideon there, he’s been hurt.’

Lang looked at the support chair. 'He is a disabled person? In a support unit?'

'He's been stabbed.'

'By what?'

'Long story.' Nayl began.

+Harlon. Just cut to the chase.+

Nayl nodded at Ravenor. 'May I show you something, Colonel Lang?' he asked.

'Go on.'

He moved to the chair. 'Don't get jumpy or trigger happy now,' he added to the two troopers. 'Hand it to me, Gideon.'

The chair opened a mechanical slot on its nose and displayed Ravenor's Inquisitorial rosette, the badge of Special Condition. Nayl took it out and handed it to Lang.

'This is Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor, of the Ordos Helican. The rest of us are part of his chosen company. We have been through a terrible experience that has deposited us here on your world. We request, by the authority of the Inquisition, your immediate help.'

Lang handed the rosette to one of the troopers. 'Get this checked.' she said. The man hurried out of the chamber.

'If that claim is true, I apologise for your treatment.' She took out a link. 'I need Medicae Bashesvili standing ready in the infirmary quickly, and get someone to bring water and food.'

'Thank you, colonel,' said Nayl. 'We—'

'How did you get here?' asked Lang.

'Via a portal.'

'A what?'

'A portal.'

'I don't understand.'

'Neither do I, really. It's been rough, but that's why I want to know where we are.'

‘This is Rahjez, in the Fantomine subsector.’

‘Fantomine? Throne, that’s... that’s right out on the edge of the Ultima Segmentum.’

‘If your story is more than a story, you’re a long way from home,’ Lang replied. ‘This is Listening Station Arethusa on—’

‘What did you say?’ Nayl cut in, sharply.

‘That this is Listening Station Arethusa.’

Nayl looked at the chair. ‘You were aiming for the *Arethusa*, weren’t you?’

+Yes, Harlon.+

‘Shit,’ Nayl moaned. ‘That frigging door...’

‘Who are you talking to?’ asked Lang nervously. ‘Are you talking to the cripple? Is he speaking?’

‘My master Ravenor is a psyker,’ said Nayl. ‘For some reason, he can’t read you.’

Lang nodded. ‘It’s because we’re implanted with blockers when we do a tour here on Rahjez. The ku’kud screams when we burn it.’

‘The what?’

‘The thorn weed. It grows very rapidly, and would choke the station if we didn’t use the burn gangs to crop it back on a daily basis, but it is psy-active. At night, it whispers. When we kill it, it screams. The cumulative effect of either can be lethal. When we are sent here for a duty rotation, we are psychically blocked to preserve our sanity.’ She leaned forwards, and pulled back her hair to reveal the implant lodged in the base of her skull. ‘Unblocked, you will quickly start to suffer.’

‘May I ask you another question?’ asked Nayl.

‘I suppose so,’ Lang replied.

‘What year is this?’

‘What *what*?’

‘What year is this, the calendar date?’ Nayl asked, looking her in the eyes.

‘It is 404, of course,’ she said. ‘404.M40.’



EIGHT

THE *ARETHUSA* WAS cold and forbidding when they came back from the surface. It had never been the most comfortable ship, nor the most welcoming but as they stepped in through the air-gate, it felt especially dank and stale.

Unwerth scampered ahead of them, excited. ‘Fyflank has fixated something!’ he exclaimed.

‘It had better be something good.’ Thonius said to the others. ‘My mind is made up. It would take a lot to change it.’

‘Wait to see what Unwerth has found,’ said Kys. ‘If it’s Siskind’s ship—’

‘If, if, if...’ echoed Thonius. ‘I want a course set for Thracian by tonight.’

Kys and Kara waited while the others wandered despondently out of the dock bay.

‘Is Thracian such a good idea, Patience?’ Kara asked once the others were out of earshot. ‘The mercy of Lord Rorken?’

Kys shrugged. ‘It’s Carl’s call, Kar, and maybe he’s right. We should try to make amends now he’s gone.’

‘Has he, though?’

Kys looked at her. ‘What do you mean?’

Kara tilted her head. ‘Since when did Gideon ever not beat the odds?’

‘Nice try, Kara Swole,’ Kys replied. ‘I’m afraid I just can’t buy in to that sort of optimism. I saw the Wych House perish and I saw how damaged he was. He’s gone from us.’

Kara sighed. Kys felt how close to tears the smaller woman was.

‘It’s been hard, up here,’ Kara said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The ship’s been misbehaving. On again, off again, while we were waiting for you. I didn’t want to bother you with it, so I never sent.’

‘How is the ship misbehaving?’ asked Kys quietly.

Kara laughed humourlessly ‘Oh, like it’s haunted. The whole crew is spooked. No one can sleep, and we keep hearing sobbing.’

‘I thought you looked tired.’

‘Tired?’

‘Drained. Strung out.’

‘Well, I am. Everyone aboard is. Even before we heard what... what had happened.’

‘So, sobbing?’

‘Yes, and manic laughter, through the vox, even when it’s shut down.’

‘I don’t sense anything.’ said Kys, uncertainly, tentatively allowing her mind to reach out.

‘You will. You won’t sleep, or if you do, it won’t be calm. That’s why I said what I said about Gideon.’

‘Explain?’

Kara shrugged. ‘I thought it might be him, somewhere, trying to get through.’

‘Let me look into it.’ said Kys. She had a distinct notion of what might be wrong, and there was no way she was going to scare Kara Swole with the idea yet.

‘Look,’ she said brightly, ‘there’s someone who loves you.’

Kara turned around. Belknap was waiting for her in the arch of the main docking clamp.

She crossed to him and they hugged.

‘Is it true?’ Belknap asked Kys as she approached.

‘Is what true, Patrik?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Is Ravenor dead, Kys?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid he is,’ she replied.

KYS STRODE INTO the infirmary ward. There was no sign of Frauka, except a dish full of lho-stick butts and a forsaken data-slate. Zael lay on the cot, thin and cold as ice.

+Zael?+

No response.

+Zael?+

She turned as Wystan Frauka re-entered the room behind her. He was dabbing his nose with a paper swab from the surgery.

‘Oh, you’re back then?’ he asked.

‘Where were you?’

‘Out there,’ Frauka gestured, meaning the surgery chamber. ‘Don’t often see you down here.’

‘I didn’t realise I needed an appointment,’ she snapped.

‘Steady,’ he soothed. ‘Listen, I heard what happened. I’m sorry, truly.’

She stared at him. She was aware that a rising tide of grief was making her irritable and short-fused. ‘Has he woken?’

‘Zael? No.’

‘And you’d tell me if he had?’

‘No, I’d keep it a secret,’ Frauka retorted, sitting down on his chair. ‘What is this?’

‘Kara told me the ship has been troubled while we were away.’

Frauka blew up his cheeks and exhaled a sort of resigned sigh. ‘So I’ve heard.’

‘Not felt anything yourself?’

‘I’m an untouchable, baby.’

‘I’d appreciate it if you kept the pet-names to yourself. Have you experienced any of the phenomena the others have reported?’

‘No,’ he said. He sat down and reached for a lho-stick but didn’t light it. Untouchable though he was, he was aware of the tension in the room.

‘They’ve told me things. Sobbing on the vox. Boguin was in the galley last night, and he heard laughter coming out of plumbing. Fyflank says he

hears footsteps following him every time he takes a stroll along the holds. Other stuff. I dunno, Kys, show me a ship that isn't full of noises. The crew's agitated, especially now they know he's not coming back. Imagination does stuff to you.'

'But you've heard nothing?'

'No.'

'And Zael hasn't woken, even for a moment?'

Frauka met her eyes. 'I know what's at stake, Kys, and you know the damned responsibility Ravenor handed me. You think I like that? You think I'd lie to you?'

'I don't know. Truth is, Frauka, none of us know you very well at all. We can't read you.'

'Story of my life. You have no idea whatsoever how hard it is to be an untouchable. Everyone feels the absence, and it makes them uncomfortable. You get treated like shit. Working for Ravenor's the only decent job I've ever had, the only time I've felt worth anything. I guess that's over now, isn't it? Get off my back. I've covered yours long enough, and I deserve more respect, even if I make you uncomfortable.'

They stared at each other. On a different day, under different circumstances, she might have been more sympathetic. In his own, alien fashion, Wystan Frauka had saved them more times than she could count. He certainly deserved their respect, but just then, she felt unable to give it. She was too scared.

'Where were you?' she asked.

'When?'

'When I came in here?'

'Back there,' said Frauka defensively. 'Like I said—'

'Why?'

'I was looking for a swab. I had a nosebleed.'

'A nosebleed?'

'Yes, I had a nosebleed.'

‘Only one?’ Kys asked, glancing down at several blood-soaked swabs littering the floor under Zael’s cot. She looked up again slowly and stared at Frauka. ‘Nosebleeds: secondary indicative symptom of proximal psychic activity.’

‘Or of picking your nose.’ Frauka snapped. ‘I’m an untouchable, remember?’

‘He’s awake, though, isn’t he?’ Kys asked, looking back at Zael.

‘I’d have sensed it.’

‘Sensed it?’

‘Blocked it, I mean.’

‘You know what he is? What he could be?’

‘I’m very aware of what he *might* be, Mamzel Kys.’

Kys lunged at Frauka and dragged him out of his chair. The bedside cabinet crashed over, spilling Frauka’s dish of lho-stick butts and his data-slate onto the deck. He cried out in surprise, and tried to fight her off. He was strong, and large, but she was determined and she was a trained, principal agent of the Inquisition. She outclassed him many times over. She slammed Frauka back into the wall, and pinned him, her forearm across his throat.

‘Why? Why are you doing this?’ he gasped.

‘You tell me why,’ she hissed. She reached out with her telekinesis, still pinning him physically, and pulled the autopistol out of his pocket. It floated up beside their faces.

‘I know why you have this. You know why you have this. Ravenor trusted you.’

‘Kys!’

‘He woke up, didn’t he? He’s awake. That’s why the ship is sobbing out of its decks. What’s the matter, Frauka, too pussy to do it?’

‘No,’ Frauka yelled. Kys stepped away and shoved Frauka away onto the deck. He fell awkwardly. She turned and grabbed hold of the floating pistol, racking the slide with her mind.

Kys stepped forwards. She aimed the pistol at Zael's head with a steady, two-handed grip.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

Frauka crashed into her and brought her down hard. They wrestled on the floor. The weapon went off, and the slug tore into the ceiling.

Belknap burst into the infirmary. Without hesitation, he dived at the pair of them. Guard training took over and he managed to pull them apart.

'Get off!' Belknap shouted, pushing Frauka away. Frauka bashed into the wall, and sat down heavily. He blinked, dazed, at Belknap fighting brutally to contain Kys. Kys had caught the doctor in a telekinetic hold and was lifting him away from her. Frauka reached up and turned off his limiter.

Belknap crashed down onto Kys. They rolled, slamming into the legs of Zael's cot. Belknap headbutted Kys in the nose and, as she floundered, pincered her in a secure restraint hold.

'Get off me!' Kys howled, blood dribbling from her nostrils. 'Get off me, you bastard, or so help me—'

'Drop it!' Belknap ordered, tightening his hold. He pinched at the soft pressure points, and then yanked Kys's hand back and squeezed until she let go of the gun. It clattered onto the decking.

'Not in my damn infirmary,' he snarled. 'Never in my place of care! You don't do this!'

'He's Slyte!' Kys screamed, struggling back. 'We have to kill him before —'

'Not in here, ever,' said Belknap firmly. He forced one of his knees forwards to pin her right forearm and then, reluctantly, chopped a punch into Kys's spinal nerve cluster. Kys backed out and went limp.

'Get Kara down here,' he told Frauka.

'WHAT THE FRIG were you thinking of, you daft ninker?' Kara asked. She came into the little holding tank in the *Arethusa's* brig block where Kys

was sprawled. Wystan Frauka, diligently smoking a lho-stick, hovered in the doorway behind her.

‘I was thinking about keeping all of us alive, Kar,’ Kys replied, rolling over and sitting up. ‘Let me out of here.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Why?’

‘You tried to murder Zael.’

‘He’s not Zael, he’s Slyte.’

Kara shook her head.

‘Your boyfriend’s a tough bastard,’ Kys said, rubbing her neck. ‘He doesn’t mess around.’

‘He’s not my boyfriend,’ said Kara.

‘What is he, then?’

‘My... lover. Boyfriend is a stupid word.’

‘Whatever he is, he smacked me up. Very gentlemanly. I would have been impressed if I wasn’t spark out. Fancy moves, if you’re easily impressed by a man beating a woman. He ever do that to you, Kar?’

‘Stop it.’

‘Thing is,’ Kys said quietly, ‘he should have let me do it.’

‘Murder Zael? A helpless kid?’

‘Not so helpless. He’s a daemon, and he’s waking up.’

‘Why are you saying this, Patience?’

‘You know why, Kar. Gideon told us. Slyte could be sleeping in that boy’s body.’

‘*Could* being the operative word. You went crazy.’

‘Come on. That’s why Gideon set Frauka to watch him and told him to shoot the boy if he ever woke up.’

‘What?’ asked Kara, recoiling.

‘It’s true, ask the frigging blunter yourself!’

‘Hello? Standing in the room? In earshot?’ Frauka remarked.

‘Is this true?’ Kara asked him.

‘Oh, of course not,’ said Frauka.

‘Liar!’ Kys yelled. ‘Gideon told me—’

‘Patience—’ Kara shushed.

‘It’s not a lie,’ said Frauka.

‘Kara, he’s tainted. He’s no longer secure,’ Kys cried desperately. ‘Frauka is suffering nosebleeds.’

‘It’s congenital,’ said Frauka.

‘Screw congenital,’ said Kys. ‘He’s impaired. Zael’s psychic force has penetrated him. Wake up, Kara! The blunter safeguard is compromised, the boy is stirring, the frigging ship is haunted! Gideon told me to watch for this!’

‘And execute a teenage boy?’ Kara turned away. ‘Sholto has a fix on what he believes is the *Allure*. We are trying to talk Carl into pursuing it. I wish I had your backing on that, Patience, but you’re... messed up. I’m sorry.’

She left the tank. The door slammed shut and the lock turned.

‘Kara!’ Kys screamed.

‘WELL, THAT WAS unpleasant,’ Frauka said as he walked down the brig block hallway with Kara.

She paused, and looked around at him. ‘If it turns out there’s any truth in what she said, Wystan, I will gut you myself. That’s a promise.’

‘Fair play,’ he replied, ‘but I’m telling the truth.’

Kara nodded. ‘I’ve got to get upstairs.’

‘Are we going after this *Allure* then?’ Frauka asked.

‘I hope so.’

There was a long, awkward pause as they faced one another. ‘Well, it’s been pleasant chatting,’ Frauka said, and turned. She watched him walk away down the companionway.

Kara headed for the bridge.

MOST OF THE crew had assembled on the bridge deck. A few looked up as Kara walked in. Sholto Unwerth was in his command seat, studying several consoles of flickering data.

Belknap was waiting by the main entry hatch. He stopped Kara and held her for a moment.

‘I didn’t enjoy that,’ he said quietly. ‘Kys is your friend, mine too, I thought, but she was just crazy. I had to stop her. I’ve never seen—’

‘It’s all right,’ Kara replied. ‘Kys has been through a lot. You did what you had to do.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘With me? Nothing. Something at the back of my mind.’

‘Still?’

‘I’ll get over it.’

She broke from him and walked down onto the main bridge deck of the *Arethusia*. ‘Sholto?’ Unwerth looked up from his consoles. ‘Is Patience all right?’ he asked.

‘She’s fine. What have you got?’

‘A strengthy lead,’ Unwerth replied. ‘We have been able to fixate a vehicle pattern on that yonder. I’m plucking it up for you now.’

Graphic display detail lit up on the main viewer: the digitally enhanced plot of one of the sixty starships at high anchor over Utochre.

‘That’s the *Allure*?’ she asked.

‘It took a good deal of fidgetation to locate,’ Unwerth replied.

‘But it’s the *Allure*?’

‘I would staple my life on it,’ said Unwerth. ‘It’s displaying alternating running codes and signals, but its inheritable pattern is that of the *Allure*.’

‘Current situation?’

‘It’s taking on supplies from service boats prior to disembarkation,’ said Plyton.

‘How long before it breaks anchor?’

‘Six hours, eight maybe,’ Plyton said.

Kara nodded. She turned and looked at the pale man standing by the main viewer, a galeweave throw draped around his hunched shoulders.

‘Carl?’

Thonius turned to look at them. ‘What do you want me to say, Kara? We don’t have the manpower or the firepower to board or seize them. They’re three times our displacement.’

‘We’re just going to let them go?’ she asked.

Thonius shrugged. ‘I’d love to bring them down, but I don’t see how.’

‘A stealth boarding raid,’ suggested Ballack. ‘Two or three gigs with muzzled drives.’

‘A loveable conception.’ said Unwerth, ‘accept for the veritable factor that the *Arethusia* doesn’t have two or three gigs. It doesn’t even have one. We have two cargo landers, and that’s the summation. Neither are muzzleable.’

Fyflank nodded.

‘See?’ said Thonius. ‘There’s nothing we can do.’

‘Except watch them translate away?’ said Ballack. ‘Throne, Carl, that ship is our last lead to Molotch.’

Thonius sighed. ‘I’m tired of hunting Molotch. I say we lay course for Thracian Primaris now and get the unpleasantness over with.’

‘We could, in all benediction, follow them,’ said Unwerth quietly.

‘Follow a ship through the warp?’ Thonius scoffed. ‘I knew you were short, Unwerth, I didn’t realise you were also short on brains. We could translate after them, but after that, in the Immaterium...’

‘That was not my meaning,’ said Unwerth. ‘We could follow them, if we knew where they were going.’

‘There’s a sort of brilliant, simple logic to that,’ said Kara.

‘Oh, yes, let’s give the shipmaster a big round of applause,’ said Thonius.

‘Don’t mock, Carl,’ said Kara.

‘Please,’ Thonius retorted. ‘Do I actually have to remind you that we *don’t* know where they are going? Which largely clobbers the brilliant,

simple logic out of Unwerth's idea.'

'*They* know where they're going,' said Plyton, nodding at the screen plot.

'Well, of course *they* do,' replied Thonius.

'Right now,' Plyton pressed, quietly, 'they'll have chosen a heading, begun stellar translation computations, started the disembarkation rituals. The Navigator will already be focusing and preparing, readying himself for the trials of the Empyrean...'

'So if somebody got aboard,' said Kara, 'say via a service boat...'

'Oh, no,' said Thonius. 'No, no, no.'

'Carl,' Kara began.

'Please, Carl,' said Ballack. 'I think it's worth a try.'

'It would be suicide,' said Thonius. 'Even if a person could get aboard, and stay out of sight and harm's way, even if that person could identify the destination, and signal the information, they would never get out again.'

'If I got in,' said Kara, 'I'd get out.'

'If it was you,' said Ballack. 'However, I'm volunteering.'

'Wait a minute,' objected Plyton. 'I called it—'

'No one called it,' Thonius snapped. 'No one's going!'

'One last try, Carl,' Kara said. 'For Gideon's sake. One last try to find Molotch and finish him.'

Thonius didn't reply. He stared at the deck and shrugged. 'You're mad,' he said.

'I'm not mad,' said Kara, 'but I am going.' She looked at Plyton and Ballack. 'Sorry, no arguments. Only one of us three has been on that vessel before. Someone get a lander prepped for me, quickly.'

Kara walked back to the hatchway where Belknap was standing.

'I'm not very happy about this,' he said quietly. 'Thonius is right, this is suicide. There are too many risks and too many variables.'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I knew you wouldn't like it, but this is what I do.'

'Kara, the risks—'

She smiled at him, and made the sign of the aquila. 'Have faith,' she said.

FRAUKA WALKED BACK into the infirmary and righted his chair. He sat down.

Thank you.

‘For what?’

Protecting me.

‘I don’t know why I did. I don’t know anything any more.’

But you can hear me?

Yes. That still bothers me. I shouldn’t be able to.’

No, you shouldn’t. I think the time’s coining when you won’t be an untouchable any more. I’ve burnt you out. I’ve made you touchable. I’m sorry about that.

‘I know this is all wrong. I know you’ve screwed up my head. You made me lie.’

Not really.

‘I should tell someone.’

No.

Frauka blinked, and seemed to find focus for a second. Fear crossed his face. ‘Throne, I know what you’re doing to me! Stop it! For Throne’s sake! You made me lie, you made me lie to them! To Kys, and Swole, and—’

Quiet, Wystan.

‘I will not be quiet!’ he rose to his feet, and scrabbled for the wall link. ‘I need t—’

Sit down. You need to sit down and be quiet. We’re not there yet.

Frauka lowered his hand and sat down, obediently. His eyes were blank.

‘Mmm, yes,’ he said. ‘Sit down. That’s a good idea.’ He picked up his data-slate. ‘Where were we?’

‘She was gasping in gleeful pleasure as he took her’. Uh, Wystan?

‘Yes?’

Your nose is bleeding.

Frauka looked down at the spots of blood plipping onto his shirt front.

‘Damn, my nose is bleeding.’

Get a swab.

‘I’ll get a swab,’ he said, rising up out of the chair.

KYS CROUCHED AGAINST the door of the brig tank, her ear to the lock. Once again, she tried to kine her way through the tumblers and align them so that the bolt would slide. Ravenor himself had inscribed the tumblers with wards to make it hard for a psyker to manipulate them the day he had taken over the *Arethusa*.

There was a clunk. The door remained in place. She cursed aloud and placed her ear back against the key hole.

+Kys.+

Patience lurched back.

+Hello?+

There was silence. Her imagination.

She leaned back to try again.

+Kysssss.+

‘Throne!’ she pulled back and scrambled away from the door on her backside.

+Who is that? Who is that?+

+It’s me, Kys. It’s me.+

She swallowed.+Gideon?+

+It’s me, Kys. I’m just here, on the other side of the door.+

+The door?+ Kys hurried back to the lock and examined it.+Gideon?+

+Still here, Kys, but so far away. It feels like a thousand years. I am so trapped, so lost. I want to be there.+

+Gideon, great Throne, you’re alive!+

There was a long silence.

+Gideon?+

+Kys? I lost you there. I’m weak. So very weak. I lost you there for a moment. Are you still there?+

+Yes, I am!+

She pressed her cheek harder to the cold steel door, listening at the keyhole.

+Gideon? Gideon?+

+I'm here, but I'm so far away. I want to be there. I'm hurt. I'm locked in. The door won't open.+

+I'm trying to open it!+ Kys fell back, panting with the effort.

+I want to be with you, Kys. I can feel it coming. I'm weak. I don't know what to do.+

+What's coming?+

+Death. I can feel it. It's coming. I can taste it. It wants me. It wants to take me. I've been keeping it at bay, fending it off, but I can't much longer.+

+How can I help you?+ she sent, frantically.

+Open the door. Open the door. Open the door.+

+I'm trying! I'm trying, Gideon!+ she sent back, fumbling with her mind into the delicate cylinders of the door's lock.+I think I can open it!+

The lock squeezed tighter. With a gasp of fatigue, Kys fell back.

+Kys, can I ask you a question?+

+Of course!+

+Who's Gideon?+

Kys scrambled back from the hatch into the far corner of the tank.+What do you mean? What the hell do you mean "Who's Gideon?" Who am I talking to?+

+Don't be like that, Kys.+

+Who am I talking to?+

The handle of the tank door began to move by itself, jerking impotently up and down. A sheen of ice suddenly crackled across the face of the door, forming slow, lazy crusts across the metal. Laughter, manic and wild, began to echo out of the keyhole.

+You know who I am,+ the voice said.



NINE

MEDICAE LUDMILLA BASHESVILI was a tall, scrawny woman in her late fifties. She had spent too much of her career treating dog troop Guardsmen for clap, ear infections and sprains. She entered the infirmary and her gaze fell on the battered chair, her hands tucked into the front pocket of her smock.

‘What the hell is this?’ she asked. ‘I’m a doctor, not a tech adept.’

‘It’s a life-support system,’ said Nayl, standing nearby under the careful watch of two armed troopers. Angharad and Iosob had already been taken away into detention. Lang had allowed Nayl to stay with Ravenor.

‘And who might you be?’ Bashesvili asked.

‘My name is Harlon Nayl,’ Nayl replied.

‘Oh, fancy,’ said Bashesvili. ‘Tough guy, I suppose?’

‘You mean me or the chair?’ asked Nayl.

Bashesvili bent down and examined the chair. She peered at it, and ran her hands over the chair’s surface, touching the dent-wounds and scratches. She wiped an index finger into some of the discharged fluid, sniffed it, and made a face. ‘Does he speak?’

‘Ordinarily, but his voxsponder is broken. He sends to me.’

‘He’s a psyker?’

Nayl nodded.

Bashesvili exhaled and stood upright, putting her hands on her hips. ‘He’s dying. That much is clear. Critical impairment to the support system and the device’s integument.’

She gently steered the chair into the diagnosis bay, pushing aside the gurney where her more regular patients usually reclined. Nayl watched her. Bashesvili turned on a number of the devices, including an array of raised

scanner pads held upright on a chrome frame. She bent a few of them over to better address the chair. Monitor screens lit up on the display consoles, and she studied them. Then she took out a paddle sensor and ran it over the casing.

‘This is thick armour.’ she said. ‘I dread to think what might have punched holes in plating this tough. Trouble is, it’s so thick, I’m not getting any kind of useful imaging through it.’

‘What can you do?’ asked Nayl.

‘I could attempt to link up an external life support system to stabilise him, but...’ She bent down to examine the recessed ports and ducts in the chair’s back.

‘But?’

‘But... looks like the connectors and feeds are non standard fitting. This chair is a custom build. So that’s no good. It’d be a stop-gap anyway. To attempt to save him, I’ll have to get in there.’

‘No,’ said Nayl firmly. ‘He doesn’t allow that.’ The armed guards either side of him tensed, ready to restrain him.

‘Does he allow himself to die?’ Bashesvili asked Nayl.

‘What?’

‘I simply can’t help him if I can’t get in there. Will he allow that, if his life is in the balance?’

Nayl shrugged. ‘He is an Imperial inquisitor. His name is Gideon Ravenor. As far as I know, he hasn’t been out of that chair since he was placed in it.’

‘How long ago?’

‘Decades. He is a private person.’

‘I’m a medicae,’ said Bashesvili. ‘We reach our own understandings.’

She ran her hands over the cowlings of Ravenor’s chair again.

The hatch banged open. It was Lang and two more troopers.

‘Colonel!’ said Bashesvili, straightening up and saluting.

‘Doctor,’ Lang nodded. She looked at Nayl. ‘We have consulted with the local ordos. They’re searching their records. So far, they cannot find any trace of your credentials. Nice try. The badge had me fooled.’

‘Colonel—’ Nayl began.

‘They’re still checking,’ Lang said, ‘and signals have been sent astropathically to nearby sector conclaves. I have been promised an answer with all due haste, but realistically, this could take days, even weeks. In the meantime, sir, I have to presume the worst and deprive you of your liberty.’

‘Please,’ said Nayl.

‘This is wartime,’ said Lang, ‘and wartime rules apply. I cannot take post security anything less than seriously. The rebels have attacked this station before and may do it again, at any moment.’ She stared at Nayl. ‘They may already be here.’

‘Take him to the cell block,’ Lang told the guards. They marched Nayl out of the room.

‘This one needs attention, colonel,’ Bashesvili said. ‘He’s in a poor state.’

‘Do what you can to make him fit for interrogation,’ said Lang.

The colonel and her escort left. The hatch closed. Alone, Bashesvili looked down at the battered chair.

‘Where possible,’ she said, ‘I like to establish a dialogue with my patients.’

A tiny rasp of response came from the machine.

‘You know,’ said Bashesvili, ‘a does it hurt? Doesn’t it hurt? Say “ahhh” type of thing.’

There was another tiny gasp.

‘I shouldn’t do this,’ said Bashesvili, ‘but I’m wilful, and menopausal, and at the bad end of a long drudge tour out here on Rahjez.’ She reached up into her hairline and slowly unscrewed her blocker implant. She set it down on the polished table beside her.

‘Is that better? Hello in there?’

+It is better. Can you hear me?+

‘Extraordinary! Yes, I can. You’re strong. Like a song in my head. You have a nice voice. Mellow. You were a handsome devil, weren’t you?’

+I don’t know.+

‘Yes, you were, once. I can tell. Now, what’s your name?’

+Gideon.+

‘Hello, I’m Ludmilla. Don’t you dare think of messing with my head now, you understand? I have a responsibility here.’

+I won’t. I promise. Believe me, Ludmilla. All I want is for this pain to stop.+

‘Yeah, well, you’re screwed. I can tell just by the whiff of you. You’re rotting inside that box. I need to open you up. Your friend seemed to think that was a no-go. What do you say?’

+I say... I can’t hold on much longer, Ludmilla.+

‘That’s a start,’ she said. She reached over and swung in a hinged table of sterile tools. ‘What happens? Do you open your case, or do I have to crack it with a cutter?’

+Wait.+

‘What for?’ she asked. She wiped at her face suddenly, as if cobwebs had brushed against it. ‘What are you doing? I can feel that! What are you doing?’

+Forgive me. I was looking into your mind.+

‘Oh. Kindly don’t do it again.’ She paused, and then asked, ‘What did you see?’

+I saw enough to know I can trust you. I have to trust you. I will open the casing. Please don’t be distressed by what you see inside.+

‘Bloody hell, Gideon,’ she snorted. ‘You haven’t got anything I haven’t seen before. How does the casing open?’

Ravenor didn’t reply. There was a slow hiss of releasing catches, and the upper part of his chair slowly lifted away. Vapour oozed out. A dull, blue light shone from the open cavity.

‘Oh, Gideon,’ she said, peering inside. ‘Oh, you poor man.’

She turned, pulled on surgical gloves and looked back into the cavity. ‘I think I’m going to have to call for interns to help me so I can—’

+No interns. No one else. Just you.+

‘Ow!’ she said. ‘Not so fierce with the sending, please.’

+I’m sorry, but please—+

‘All right. If that’s what you want.’ She bent down and reached into the cup of warm, stagnant fluid. She circled her arms underneath Ravenor’s physical form.

‘Have I got you? Are you supported?’

+Yes.+

Bashesvili lifted him out of the chair. Tiny ducting relays and drip feeds, clustered in their thousands, like fronds of hair, pulled away.

+Nhhhg!+

‘It’s all right, Gideon,’ she soothed. ‘Shush, shush. It’s all right. I’ve got you. Gideon?’

The wet, blood-smeared, respiring sack of pale flesh she held in her arms had gone very quiet.

‘Gideon?’

‘THEY DON’T BELIEVE us?’ snarled Angharad.

‘No.’

‘They don’t believe us?’ she repeated.

‘No!’ said Nayl. ‘Now, hush. I’m thinking.’

‘We’re a thousand years out,’ said Iosob from the corner of the cell. ‘That’s an awful long way.’

‘I know it is,’ said Nayl. ‘That means a confirmation of our status is never going to come because we don’t exist yet. I was just hoping we could delay them. It’s ironic. The rosette is genuine, but to them it’s a fake. Now shut up both of you and let me think.’

‘Ow!’ he said, almost immediately. Spiky pain had jabbed into his head.

‘I feel that too,’ said Angharad, massaging her temples.

‘It’s Gideon,’ said Nayl, rising. ‘It’s Gideon. He’s hurting.’

‘Maybe,’ said Angharad, ‘but didn’t they warn us? Something about the thorns after dark?’

Night had fallen outside. Through the small, barred slit of a window, they could hear the thorn brush – the ku’kud – around the compound whispering and rustling.

‘Oh, great.’ Nayl growled. All right, our choices have just been reduced to one.’

‘Which is?’

‘We bust out of here.’

Angharad gazed at him with steady, hooded eyes. ‘Far be it for me to mention a few “ifs”, but—’

‘But?’

‘*If* we can open that cell hatch, *if* we can evade the guards without getting gunned down, *if* we can find a way out of the compound, and *if* Ravenor is fit enough to accompany us—’

‘Reach a point, please, woman.’ Nayl said.

‘If your good friend Gideon is hurt and can’t be moved, will you leave him here?’

‘No,’ said Nayl.

‘Then there’s no point breaking out. It would be signing our own death warrant. To escape, and then not flee?’

Nayl sighed and leaned his back against the cell wall. He slid down it until he was sitting on the floor. Angharad presumed he had given up.

‘Are all Carthaen women so pessimistic?’ he asked. ‘I thought you were a warrior?’

‘A good warrior knows when to fight,’ said Angharad.

‘And a better one knows when to improvise,’ Nayl countered. He’d sat down to tug off one of his boots.

‘What is he doing?’ asked Iosob, sitting up to watch. Angharad shrugged.

Lang's guards had searched them all, and scanned them scrupulously for metallics and concealed weapons. They'd found Nayl's boot knife, the coil of multi-purpose wire he carried around his waist, and the small pebble charge he kept in a wrist pocket.

He levered open the heel of his boot, and carefully teased something out of the rubberised sole. It was a slim jemmy pick, made of inert plastek.

'This answers your first *if*,' he said, holding it up. 'This opens the hatch. The points you raised were good, and I can't argue with them, but we still have to do this.'

'And when the hatch opens?' she asked.

'Like I said, we improvise,' he grinned. 'I'm good at that.'

Angharad nodded. 'One of the few things I like about you.'

IF THIS IS how I am going to die, I am strangely happy about it. To be free, one last time. To be outside the chair. To feel the air on my skin.

I cannot say what fate I expected, but it was certainly some titanic doom, suffered in the service of the ordos.

I suppose this is exactly that in a way, but it's also a calm end, and a free one. The plight we are in seems so very far away. The impossible divorce from our own place-time. It fades, and seems insubstantial.

I fade too.

Stay awake, stay awake. All that seems important any more is lying here, in the cool air. I'm feeling the useless, dying body I own twitch and tremble as Ludmilla Bashesvili works.

She is breathing hard. I can feel her tension. I can also feel her devotion. She has fixed various links to my circulatory systems and organs. I can hear machines beeping and chiming. I can feel a warm glow, which I presume is either anaesthetic or the in-feed of intravenous fluids and blood.

I can also feel a scratching around the edges of my mind. Ludmilla feels it too, and it bothers her. The ku'kud. Night has fallen, and the brush is active outside. It is not a sentience, just a dry, gristly hiss of residual

psychic activity. It is not unpleasant, just irritating, like a chorus of insects. A vast body of psi-responsive matter, like a sponge.

‘Gideon?’ she asks, putting a bloody tool down in a steel dish with a clatter. ‘With me, still?’

+Yes.+

‘Good,’ she says.

She’s lying. I go free for a moment, and see the world through her eyes. I see the shrunken, twisted thing that is me lying on the surgery table. Bunches of squirting pipes and sucking tubes intrude into me through catheters. I have not seen myself in the flesh for a long time.

Poor, withered flesh. A wrinkled sack of organs and redundant bones, the vague, vestigial remains of a human face, sunk low like a tumour on the top of the sack. God-Emperor, how did I ever survive the Thracian Atrocity? God-Emperor, why did you let me survive?

I see the discoloured flesh, the atrophied ends of truncated joints. I see the pallor of my burn-tissue skin, the cicatrice scars of my original surgery. I notice also the patches of black bruising and necrotisation, creeping across my form like the shadows of leaves on the ground. I see the wounds the hooked things made, pussy and raw, like gaping mouths. I was hurt even more than I thought. Ludmilla has just removed a hank of hook bone ten centimetres long from what I once called my belly. She drops it into a bowl in disgust. *The Great Devourer*.

My mind swims. There is pain, but beyond the pain, there is a solace, which I think might be death. Ludmilla threads a needle.

I have to stay awake. I know this. I know this.

I look into her. I slide through reefs of sadness and concern that part easily because she is concentrating elsewhere. The life of a field medic is no life, I quickly realise. Hers has been long and unrewarding. Thought engrams dazzle and open. I see her siblings in the family home. Laughing children, a cherished nugget of memory. A blue dress. Her father’s posting. Her father’s death. I see a bad marriage, and a few disastrous love affairs. I see a child she lost.

I am a voyeur. I should care, and be ashamed of myself, but I'm not. The front of her mind is locked in effort. The back drifts, like a warm sea, forgotten.

I see the war. Thirty years long already. Rebels on Veda have risen in the cause of emancipation. Imperial secessionists. The Guard has locked the systems down. Protracted fighting on three worlds. Rumours of Guard-sanctioned massacres.

A dirty war. The Imperium fighting itself. No wonder Asa Lang was driven. The Archenemy, the greenskin, the eldar, all terrible foes. But I know, ultimately, there is no more bitter and distressing enemy than our own kind, when humans turn on humans. Ludmilla loathes it. Ah, I see... her family was from Veda. She hates this posting more. Rahjez. Right on the front, a listening watch. Front-line defenders, alert and wired all the time. She hates this.

She hates it most of all because of the ku'kud. The whispering thorn. Isolated out here, humans would be paranoid anyway. The brush makes it worse.

I wish I could soothe her. I—

+Gnnhhh!+

'Gideon? Are you still with me? I felt that?'

+I'm here.+

My voice is less than a whisper. She has just extracted another chip of broken hook bone. It clinks into a bowl.

'I'm worried about your vitals, Gideon. Please, try to stay here with me.'

+I will.+

The ku'kud is scratching at my mind. I wish I could blank it, but I can't. It's like a chorus, an insensate chorus. I—

It resonates. As I push up into it, it rustles back. Sentient or not, it amplifies my thoughts as echoes. Throne, I could—

+Annghhhhh!+

'Gideon? Gid—'

I THINK I blacked out for a moment. Yes, the table-mounted chron has skipped eight minutes.

Eight?

+Ludmilla?+

‘Gideon? Oh, for Throne’s sake! I thought I’d frigging lost you!’+Language.+

She laughs. Ludmilla has a good laugh. The men she courted would have loved her for that. Why did she never find one good enough to keep? I feel so distant now. I feel—

‘GIDEON! COME BACK to me, you bastard!’

+I’m still here.+

‘I’m going to have to go deeper in this wound. You’re going to have to be strong. Can you stand this?’

+Yes.+

‘Concentrate on something. Focus on it.’

+Yes.+

I focus on... I drift. I try to remember what I am supposed to be doing. Everything is so vapid and thin. I think of Nayl, of Kys, of Kara, I think of Will...

He’s dead. I know he’s dead. Molotch killed him.

I think of Molotch and some measure of focus returns. Zygmunt Molotch. But for him, I would not be here. But for him, my life would have been entirely different.

I feel a passionate hatred. The energy lifts me up.

‘That’s better. Good vitals. Now, this is going to really hurt.’

Molotch. Molotch. I want him. I want to finish him. A thousand years and half a galaxy away, I remember him and want to finish him. He did this to me. He put me here.

‘Gideon, your pulse rate is all off. Gideon?’

The ku’kud. The door. I can see it now. Now I can see it and—

‘Gideon?’

I can see it. Throne, I’m fading fast, I can tell. Each instrument Ludmilla pushes into me tastes different. The salt tang of the scalpel, the iron hit of the tweezers, the bleach sip of the retractors.

Oh, Throne. Oh, *Throne*, I am really dying.

But I can see it now. Oh, how I can see it. The door. The key. The ku’kud. I send it into Ludmilla’s mind. If only I could... if only I could—

‘Ow!’ she cries, jolting up. ‘Stop it with that!’

If only I could. If only I could. If only I could—

IF ONLY I could.

IF—

BASHESVILI JERKED BACK from the operating table.

‘Gideon?’ she asked.

Every single monitor device around her stopped pinging and wailed out a flat line drone.

‘No!’ she cried.



TEN

THERE WAS A bumping scrape of metal on metal, and the service boat locked into the docking clamps of the *Allure*. Servitors and deck wranglers began to move around, shouting back and forth as they started loading the modular crates of perishables and victuals onto the through-deck cargo hoists. Hydraulics sighed, bulk hatches opened, vapour drifted.

The cargo area was dark, and lit only by frosty amber overheads. Kara swung down from a crawlspace above a large duct circulator where she had hung, concealed, during the ride from the orbital station. Keeping low, she ran along the edge of the hold's raised loading pad, and then swung over onto one of the laden hoists as it started to rise.

The hoist rose into the bulk hold of the rogue trader *Allure*. The air smelled of spices and rotting fruit. Crewmen and servitors were busy unloading one of the crate stacks, moving some of the containers on trolleys through to adjacent secondary holds.

Kara slipped off the hoist into the shadows. She was wearing a black bodyglove, with a tight hood to conceal her red hair. Crewmen strolled past her, chatting. She could smell their sweat, the stale lho-scent clinging to their work clothes. She shifted to a second hiding place, and tucked in. From her position, she could see the main floor of the hold. There was Siskind himself, in his glass jacket, a cruelly handsome, red-haired man. He was talking to the master of the service boat and signing off a manifest.

Kara had been aboard the *Allure* once before, when the *Hinterlight* had seized her and inspected her en route to Lenk. That seemed like a lifetime ago, but she still had a pretty good memory of the layout. She waited for a suitable lull in the activity nearby, and then made another dash along the side access to a companionway hatch.

The hall beyond the hatch was quiet and empty. She darted through, and headed forwards.

It took her ten minutes to make her way up three decks. Five times, she had to find cover as crewmembers came by. By her estimation, the bridge was not far off.

SHE HURRIED FORWARDS, then heard footsteps and voices approaching. She looked around.

There was nowhere to hide.

Lucius Worna clanged down the companionway at Siskind's side. He towered over the shipmaster. The ugly wounds he had taken at the Wych House had been left untreated, and had begun to scab in black, scaly patches.

'How long now?' he asked.

'Thirty minutes, and we'll be shot of the last supplier,' Siskind replied. 'Then another hour as we light the engines, disengage anchors and calculate the last of the mass-velocity transactions. I thought I'd take supper now. Will you join me?'

Worna grunted. They reached the far end of the companionway, and Siskind swung open the hatch. Worna stopped and looked back.

'What?' asked Siskind.

Worna stared back down the empty walkway. He shrugged. 'I thought I... smelt something.'

'Like what?' Siskind asked.

Worna shook his head. 'Doesn't matter,' he said. They passed through the hatch and out of sight.

Kara breathed out. She dropped down out of the ceiling space and landed on her feet. Too close.

Thirty minutes, she'd heard Siskind say. If she wanted to be on that service boat when it left, that's how long she had.

THE BRIDGE, WIDE and low-ceilinged, was almost empty. Systems were cycling on automatic standby. Kara waited in the shadows as the *Allure's* first officer – Ornales, she seemed to recall him being called – checked over some console displays with two of his men. Then all three disappeared towards the navigation chamber.

The data was there, on the main console that extended down from the ceiling over the master's seat, blocks of information glowing on the repeater screen. She scrolled down carefully, reading off, until she was sure she was sure.

Voices. She ducked down behind the master's seat. She heard Ornales return, and walk through the bridge with his two companions. They left through the hatch she had entered by.

Kara rose again, and crept across to the comm station. The high gain vox was of an unfamiliar design, but she made sense of it. She set the band, altered the directional array slightly, and selected signal/non-voice. Very carefully, she typed her message on the worn, yellowing keys.

Dancer wishes Nest. Gudrun.

She pressed transmit. The machine warbled to itself quietly, and the words she'd entered on the display disappeared, to be replaced by *signal sent*.

She turned, and headed for the exit. She had, by her own maths, less than ten minutes remaining. It had taken her longer than that to reach the bridge.

She ran down the bridge-link companionway, across a four-way junction, and turned left down an access walk. She heard voices a long way behind her, but nothing close. A ladder well took her down through the deck and onto a lateral access. The mess was nearby. She could smell boiled vegetables and grease.

She hurried on to the next hatchway.

She was just a few metres away from it when Lucius Worna stepped out into the light, blocking the hatch. He stared at her with malicious intent.

She backed away, fast, and turned.

Siskind was standing ten metres behind her. The red-haired man wore a strange, satisfied smile. He was aiming a laspistol at her, straight-armed.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘Or, as I should say, goodbye.’

‘THAT’S NEVER GOING to open, is it?’ asked Angharad, watching Nayl work.

Nayl sat back from the cell door and shook his head. He had been working so intently that his scalp was beaded with perspiration. The plastek jemmy was twisted out of shape and deformed. ‘Let me give it one more—’

‘You’ve been saying that for an hour,’ Angharad said.

‘He isn’t ever going to open it,’ said Iosob. ‘Keys are funny things, and that’s not a key.’

‘Be quiet, child.’ Angharad spat.

‘She’s right,’ said Nayl, rising to his feet. He turned his back on the cell door and hurled the useless jemmy away with a grunt of frustration. It hit the far wall, and dropped onto the floor.

Outside, the ku’kud was hissing and scratching in the darkness.

There was a soft thump, a click of retracting bolts, and the cell door swung open.

‘Very good!’ cried Iosob, clapping her hands.

Nayl turned slowly around. ‘That wasn’t me,’ he said.

Ludmilla Bashesvili peered in at them.

‘There’s very little time,’ she whispered. ‘Come on.’

The three of them stared at her.

‘Are you... what are you doing? Are you springing us?’ Nayl asked.

‘Yes,’ whispered Bashesvili impatiently. ‘Come on!’

‘What about Ravenor?’ Nayl demanded.

Bashesvili looked at him. ‘I’m sorry. I have just informed Colonel Lang. Your friend Gideon died fifteen minutes ago on the operating table.’

‘IF YOU SAT down, perhaps?’ Thonius suggested.

‘No thanks,’ replied Belknap, and continued pacing the bridge.

‘I’m not thinking of you, so much,’ said Thonius. ‘You pacing up and down is starting to piss me off.’

Belknap glared at him.

‘We should have heard something by now,’ said Plyton. ‘What’s taking her so long?’

‘Just... wait,’ said Ballack. ‘She’ll be fine. She—’

Unwerth, hunched over the master console, made a small sound.

‘What?’ asked Belknap, switching around to face him. ‘What?’

Unwerth pointed dismally at the display with a disfigured hand.

‘The *Allure* just lit its drive.’ said Plyton, staring.

‘No,’ said Belknap. ‘Come on, Kara, come on. By the grace of the Throne and the blessing of the God-Emperor...’

‘It’s left grav anchorage,’ Plyton whispered. She rose to her feet, staring at the plot display. ‘Oh no.’

‘She’s running,’ said Ballack, ‘accelerating onto an out-system vector.’

‘Kara!’ Belknap howled, helplessly. The *Allure* was departing. There was nothing they could do.

The vox-bank behind Thonius chimed.

PART FOUR

END OF STORY



ONE

PATIENCE KYS REMAINED in the brig aboard the *Arethusa* for thirteen days. In part, her stay was enforced, in part voluntary.

On the first day of her incarceration, less than an hour after the terrifying voice had spoken to her from the keyhole, she felt the deck shiver. Various rumbles and vibrations followed, and she knew they were casting off. The main drives cycled up until the air filled with a long, throbbing background hum. An hour after that, she felt the brief, disconcerting shudder of translation.

Several hours later, the tank door swung open and Thonius came in with a mess tray of food and a flask of water. He set them down on the end of the tank's small cot and looked at her.

'Do you need anything else?' he asked stiffly. A book, perhaps?'

'I need to be let out of here,' she said.

He sighed. 'Kys, I can't do that. You know I can't.'

'Listen to me, Carl, please,' Kys said quickly, rising to her feet. 'Zael represents an absolute threat to us. Every second we waste brings us closer to disaster. You know what Gideon thought about the boy.'

'I know he didn't kill him immediately,' said Carl. 'I know he left the boy alive and gave him the benefit of the doubt.'

'That doubt is gone.'

'Ravenor left Frauka—'

'Frauka is compromised. Zael is awake. The daemon is here, waking, among us.'

Thonius smiled sadly. 'Patience, old thing, I feel for you, I really do. I know you think you're right, but I'll tell you what's really happening. Gideon is dead. You are undermined by grief and a mistaken feeling of

responsibility. You are not thinking clearly. You're reacting too extremely. It's understandable. You think you let Ravenor down in life, and you're trying not to do the same now he's dead.'

'Do I pay extra for the cod psychoanalysis?' she asked.

He pouted. 'This has been a bad, bad time for all of us. Don't make it worse by lashing out at phantoms.'

'You won't let me out?'

'Can I trust you not to try and kill Zael again?'

She didn't answer.

'Well, at least you didn't try to lie to me,' he said. 'You have to stay in here for now, for your own safety as much as Zael's. Maybe in a day or two —'

'I'll have calmed down? Seen sense?'

'You need time to reflect.'

Kys stared at him. 'Just a few hours ago, it spoke to me. It spoke to me through the door.'

'What did?'

She swallowed. 'Slyte.'

Thonius shook his head.

'I experienced a major psychic event,' she insisted.

'One that nobody else felt? One that didn't set off any of the ship's detectors?'

'Please, Carl! Please! I'm begging you! Examine Zael yourself, examine Frauka too. He's lying. He's protecting the boy. Please tell me you'll check it yourself. We are all in danger and—'

'Eat some food. Get some rest,' he said, moving back towards the door.

She sat down heavily on the cot. 'Where are we going?' she asked.

'Gudrun.'

'Why?'

'It's where we believe Molotch is.'

'Why?' she repeated.

‘Information received. Look, I’ve got things to do.’

‘Let me talk to Kara, then.’

A strange expression crossed his face. ‘I’ll check back later.’ he said.

SHE SLEPT FOR a while. As Kara had warned her, the quality of her sleep was not good. Flocks of whispers circled her dreams, like the eerie twittering of the Wych House.

Thonius returned six hours later with another tray, and removed the first. She’d picked at the meal.

‘Will you let me out?’ she asked.

‘Will you try to kill Zael?’

She shrugged.

‘I’ll see you in the morning.’

‘Where’s Kara?’ she asked.

With great reluctance, he told her how Kara had boarded the *Allure*, obtained the information they needed, and never returned. The news knifed shock into her. Coming so soon after the hammer blow of Ravenor’s death, it seemed extravagantly cruel and unnecessary. She wept inconsolably, tormented by a feeling of helplessness. Thonius made some half-hearted soothing noises and then left her alone.

Kys continued to weep for hours. She was so wracked with sobs it seemed that she was crying out her own grief as well as the grief Ravenor would have expressed if he had lived to witness Kara’s fate.

THE PATTERN WAS repeated for the next ten days. Carl Thonius visited her twice each day, bringing her food and water, and the occasional book or data-slate, none of which she read. She would ask to be released, and he would ask her if she still intended to hurt Zael. She would beg him to take her seriously, and he would tell her to rest and reflect.

It was always Thonius. He never made the mistake of sending Belknap or Frauka, either of whom she would have had no hesitation in trying to overpower. Carl Thonius was canny. He clearly understood this, and

understood that she would not raise a hand against him. The things he knew.

Neither Plyton nor Unwerth were sent to look in on her with food. Kys suspected Thonius didn't trust either of them to be unsympathetic.

The rest of the time was largely silent, apart from the throb of the gunning drive. Several times, she thought about trying the door again, certain she had recouped enough strength to manipulate the lock. The memory of the whispering voice dissuaded her every time.

The voice, mercifully, never returned, although the whispers haunted her edgy dreams, and on more than one occasion, wide awake, she heard distant laughter coming from nowhere.

ON THE TWELFTH day, the ship shuddered, and the tone of the drive altered, and she knew they had returned to normal space. Carl came in two hours later, but he seemed preoccupied and his visit was brief. Pausing only long enough to comment that she wasn't eating enough as he picked up the last tray, he left and locked the door.

After that, no one came at all.

The drone of the drive cut out, and the *Arethusa* fell silent. Kys paced. She waited. The silence bore down on her, total silence, apart from the sporadic stress creaks and groans of the settling hull.

When the next visit was missed, Kys drank the rest of her water and ate what remained of the last meal. Anxiety had robbed her of her appetite for eleven days. Now the waiting made her ravenous.

When she was sure she was in the thirteenth day of imprisonment, she went to the tank door and banged her fist on it, calling out. She did this for some minutes.

No one answered.

Scared, she sat down in the corner of the cell furthest from the door and waited. The hours ticked slowly by.

SHE WOKE WITH a start, still sitting in the corner. Something had woken her, some noise.

She listened. She reached out cautiously with her mind.

The first howl came out of nowhere. It lasted ten seconds, and was essentially pure psychic noise. It was like some great beast bellowing in pain, or the throat-roar of an apex predator. The first touch of it was so loud, so fierce that her mind recoiled in shock.

The echo of the howl lingered in the ship's hull.

Eyes wide in fear, she made herself as small as possible, arms around her upthrust knees. Her body was bathed in cold sweat, fear sweat, and her mind was sore from just that brief touch. She could hear her heart pounding like a marching drum.

A second howl split the air. The deck vibrated with its intensity. Kys whimpered involuntarily, viced by an extreme terror she had never known before.

Ice rime formed around the edges of the tank door, and glistened at the key hole.

A third howl issued, longer and more anguished than either of the first two. She heard hatches bang and footsteps running past along the hallway outside. Someone was shouting, but she couldn't hear what. Someone else shouted back.

Silence.

More shouting. Distant footsteps, running along a deck above. Then, an odd, piping sound that she finally, fearfully, realised was a muffled, persistent screaming. She dared not reach out with her mind.

Everything went quiet for an agonising thirty or forty minutes. The ice around the door melted into glinting spots of dew. Just when she thought nothing more would come, there was a fourth, dreadful psychic roar, and then a fifth, the longest of all. It was followed by a long, painful bout of sobbing. A man was wailing somewhere, wailing with his mind. She grimaced and tried to shut it out. The sobs clawed at the edges of her thoughts until they became frayed.

The sobbing faded. More shouting began, real voices shouting. Kys jumped at the sudden boom of a gun, a shotgun or an autorifle. It fired four times in quick succession. Someone shouted, distantly, and then a barrage of angry voices started up, yelling over one another. The shotgun fired again. A lasgun wailed.

Then silence drifted back into place.

She could bear it no longer. Kys rose and slowly approached the door, swallowing her fear back. It was like a bolus of food stuck in her throat, choking her.

She was three metres from the tank door when the most terrifying event of her life took place.

The centre of the steel door, at a little above waist height, began to bulge, as if the metal was alive. The bulge pushed in towards her, and she backed away.

An impression formed: bared teeth. The frontal dentition, upper and lower, of an adult male's skull, complete with chin bone below and traces of nasal bone above. There was no sign of eye sockets or forehead. It was as if the door had become a taut, flexible skin of rubber, and someone on the other side was pushing the lower part of an incomplete skull into it.

Something hit Kys from behind. It was the rear wall of the tank. She had backed away as far as it was physically possible to go. The imprint of the skull smile bulged in further, until it was a hand's breadth proud of the door's surface. It became even more clearly defined. The metal strained around it.

'The Emperor protects,' Kys stammered. The Emperor protects.'

The skull smile slowly opened its jaws.

Then it pulled away sharply and vanished. The door became flat again. Kys kept staring at the door.

After a second or two, the smile reappeared, bulging in at a different, higher part of the door. It opened and closed its jaws twice.

It withdrew as rapidly as before, and then reappeared lower down. This time, it writhed back and forth as it opened and closed, turning to the left,

to the right, biting at the air. Kys could hear sobbing, loud and close.

The smile withdrew again. Ice sweat tricked down the door's surface, twinkling and glittering like frost. It formed a crust, like on the inside of a refrigeration unit, and then the caked bulk of it collapsed under its own weight and shattered across the cell floor in a shower of snowy debris.

Her back to the rear wall of the tank, Kys slid down and began to shake.

THE *ARETHUSA* STAYED quiet for a long time after that. There was no more sobbing or shouting or gun-shots, no more howling. The door did not smile at her again.

Kys got up, walked towards the door, and listened.

Nothing.

She breathed in, exhaled, and quickly reached her mind into the lock. Fear and fury in equal measure fuelled her with a clinical precision. She seized the lock, scorching the tips of her mind's tendrils on the anti-psi wards, and rattled the tumblers into place.

The lock slumped open with a heavy clack and she mind-wrenched the bolt back.

Kys touched the edge of the door with the tip of one shoe and it swung open heavily.

Her thirteen-day stay in the *Arethusa's* brig had come to an end.

SHE WALKED ALONG the grim, poorly lit hallway of the brig block. Nothing howled, nothing sobbed, nothing smiled. The air was close and warm, as if the ship's air pumps had shut down.

She looked for a weapon, but the best she could find was a set of keys hanging on a peg. She took the old, heavy keys off their ring and put them in a pocket. In an emergency, she could kine them.

She stole through the brig's half open outer hatch onto the grille mesh of the lower third access. There was no sign of anything in either direction. The access was lit by wall globes, one or two of which were flickering on and off like candle flames guttering in a draught.

Her spike heels caught in the deck mesh, so she slipped her shoes off and carried them.

Padding forwards in stocking feet, she reached a junction. Ahead, the short, bulk-headed passage to the aft air gate. Left, a flicker-lit companionway turned back to the enginarium.

To the right, a corridor led forwards.

She turned right. Ten metres along, she found a spilled box of shotgun cartridges, a discarded boot and a damp towel.

The air was still very stale. More of the glow-globes and lumin panels were flickering on and off.

Kys bent down and pressed her hand against the cast iron wall, low down. There was no vibration at all. No throb of power plant, or of idling drive. Although the air was fuggy, it was getting colder.

The *Arethusa* was like a cooling corpse.

At the next junction, she reached a wall-mounted intercom, a recessed speaker cone with a brass switch. She put her shoes down and reached out for the switch.

It took her a long time to pluck up the courage to push it.

Click. A long, empty sigh of dead leaves and static breathed out of the speaker.

She took her finger off the switch and the sound went dead. She pressed the switch again, and said, into the rustling, 'Hello?'

The static shushed her.

'Hello? Anyone?'

Somewhere far away, behind the hiss of dry leaves, a man started sobbing.

Kys took her finger off the switch and killed the sound.

At the next junction, there was a fire control point riveted to the hull. She helped herself to the heavy, saw-toothed fire axe hanging over the sand box. Axe in one hand, shoes in the other, she continued on her way.

THE *ARETHUSA*'S SMALL excursion bay was empty. The docking clamps were vacant. Neither of the ship's two battered landers were present. Kys stood on the overlook platform for a while, staring down into the open vault. The heavy duty docking clamps, thick with black grease and lubricant jelly, stared back at her. Some of the fuelling hoses on the right-hand side of the bay had been disconnected in a hurry. Pools of spilled fuel covered the deck plates.

'Where did everyone go?' she asked out loud. She didn't dare ask her real question.

Why did everyone go?

HALFWAY ALONG THE companionway leading to the forward junction, she found a place where the wall plates had been dented and scorched by gunfire. The marks were fresh, carbonised. A metre or two further along, there was a smeared streak of blood on the wall, and a track of drops leading away down the tunnel.

Wall lights blinked on and off, strobing manically

She bent down. The blood was cold.

SHE ENTERED THE infirmary. She put her shoes on before she did, because the floors in the upper decks were solid plate.

She slithered in slowly, her axe raised.

The outer surgery was empty. Water drizzled out of a half open tap into a scrub bowl. She turned the faucet off. The doors to the pharm cupboards were open, and the contents ransacked. Pill boxes littered the floor. She was crunching over scattered capsules, grinding them to powder. She could hear a soft, panting, purring sound.

Kys nudged the adjoining door open with the head of her axe. The panting grew louder. She reached out, but her mind touched nothing at all.

She entered the ward room. The air stank of Frauka's lho-sticks, a cold, distant, tarnished after-smell.

There was nobody in the ward room. Zael's cot was empty. The plug feeds and drip tubes that had been keeping him alive were draped over the crumpled bed, leaking fluids. The life support unit he had been attached to was grinding and rattling, its lung bellow rising and falling with a dry pant. Cardiac systems and brainwave monitors purred aimlessly.

Kys walked over to the cot. She scraped the sheets back with the blade of her fire axe, although she knew the cot was empty. She reached over and turned off the relentless life support unit.

The bellows ceased their panting and became still. The monitors buzzed. Viscous fluid squirted out of the lank tubes left on the bed. A flat line alarm began to ping.

She wrenched the unit away from the wall to make it shut up. The bellows flapped and sighed. Silence returned.

She walked around the cot and sat down in Frauka's chair. His dish of lho-butts sat on the bedside cabinet. The last one had burned itself out in a long, perfect column of white ash. His data-slate was on the floor in front of the chair. It was still switched on, the *battery low* warning flashing.

She reached down and picked it up.

'He slowly, hungrily, licked the juice off her ample—' she read out. She switched the data-slate off and hurled it at the ward room wall. It broke and fell in pieces.

She rose and then sat down again. She'd seen something on the floor beside the bedside cabinet. She reached down with her mind and picked it up. It hovered in front of her face. It was Frauka's autopistol.

Kys took hold of it with her hand and thumbed out the clip. Full. She looked down at the floor again. It was littered with blood-soaked swabs. 'Oh, you stupid, stupid bastard,' she said.

THE *ARETHUSA*'S BRIDGE was as empty as everything else on the ship. She walked in, Frauka's pistol in one hand, the fire axe in the other.

The viewers and repeater screens flicked and scrolled mindlessly. Auto-systems chattered on and off like muffled gunfire.

‘Hello?’ she called out, hoping for an answer and no answer at the same time.

Kys sat down in the master’s chair, put down her pistol and her axe, and began tapping the keys of the main station board.

Gudrun, the screen told her. They were at high anchor above Gudrun, in the Helican sub. The ship had been set to dormancy. She punched some keys and corrected that. Cool air began to hiss through the air-scrubbers. She heard the power plant wake up.

She heard distant sobbing too, but she ignored it.

Replay recent log, she typed.

The console blinked and replied *Void*.

She repeated her command.

Void.

She was about to type again when she heard a tiny sound. It came from behind her, in the companionway leading up into the bridge. Kys picked up the autopistol, and slid down behind the master’s chair, aiming the weapon. She picked the axe up too, with her telekinesis, and lifted it into the ceiling above, just under the roof stanchions. It began to spin, chopping around like a murderous propeller.

She heard another sound, a footstep. Someone stepped onto the bridge.

Her index finger pulled at the trigger.

SHOLTO UNWERTH PEERED at her. ‘Hello?’ he said.

Kys rammed the pistol down, so that it fired into the thick deck.

‘Sorry, sorry!’ she exclaimed.

He blinked at her, baffled, flinching from the retort of the shot. She dropped the gun and ran to him, hugged him tightly, and kissed him.

‘I’m very glad to see you,’ she exclaimed.

He stared back at her, lips slightly parted in surprise as hers pulled away. She let him go. She coughed and brushed the front of his jacket as if to smooth it.

‘Master Unwerth.’

‘Patience.’

‘It’s really good to see you again. I thought I was alone up here.’

‘You kissed me.’ He frowned.

‘Yes, I did. I did kiss you. Sorry.’

‘Do not be apoplectic. It was... it was unexpectant.’

‘Well, forgive me. I’m just happy to see a friendly face.’

‘Me also,’ he said. He smiled, and then cringed as the fire axe fell out of the roof onto the deck. She’d forgotten it and let it go.

‘What, maychance, was that?’

‘Insurance,’ she smiled. ‘Are you alone?’

‘Indeed, no.’ Unwerth said. He gestured to the men behind him. Fyflank emerged into the light of the bridge, followed by Onofrio, the head cook, and Saintout, the tertiary helmsman.

‘We four are all that’s left,’ said Unwerth. ‘Following the mutiny all such.’

Fyflank grumbled his disgust.

‘Mutiny?’ Kys asked.

‘Mutiny, indeed,’ said Unwerth. ‘My crew was stricken by a mutational urge. Just after we made arrival. Just after Master Thonius took them down.’

‘Who?’

‘Mam Plyton, Masters Ballack and Belknap, and himself.’

‘Down?’

‘In a lander, number one lander, to the surface.’

‘What happened here, Sholto?’ Kys asked.

He shrugged. ‘Screaming and crying,’ he said.

‘And howling,’ added Saintout behind him.

‘Yes, and that. My poor ship went mad. Oh, the screaming and the howling! Oh, the upsetment! Boguin led the mutiny—’

‘I never liked him much,’ put in Onofrio.

‘Me neither,’ said Saintout.

‘It was Boguin’s doing,’ said Unwerth. ‘He was enspooked. When the howling started, he gripped the crew with all forcefulness. They had guns. They debarked on the second lander.’

‘Thonius had already taken the first?’ Kys nodded. ‘Sholto, where did the howling come from?’

Unwerth shrugged.

‘Where is Frauka? Where is Zael?’

‘I have no idea,’ he replied, timid and worried.

‘Sholto, we’re in trouble,’ said Kys.

Fyflank nudged Unwerth. The little shipmaster ran to his command console and adjusted some dials. Several warning lights had started to flash.

‘What?’ asked Kys, coming over.

‘Something is extruding,’ Unwerth said.

‘Extruding?’ Kys replied.

‘A ship,’ said Unwerth. ‘Bearing in towards us.’

Kys looked at the flaring screen. It was a mess of complex graphics, with little clarity. ‘Are you certain?’ Kys asked. ‘It could just be an imaging artefact.’ Unwerth fine-tuned the scanners, and the display cleaned up. The track became very legible. Plotting data overwrote the curving trajectory marker, showing comparative speed, position and size. The approaching ship was decelerating from an immaterium exit point nine astronomical units out. It seemed twice the size of the *Arethusa*. ‘Pict feed?’ she asked. ‘Can we get a visual with the stern array?’ He stabbed at some of the controls. On a secondary imaging plate, a ghost image appeared, a fog of green and amber pixilation. The screen image jumped and panned as the pict array grabbed focus and range.

They could see it. A long way off, and small but, to Patience Kys, unmistakable.

‘Oh Throne,’ Kys gasped. ‘That’s the *Hinterlight*.’

The vox bank lit up behind Unwerth. ‘Hailing signal,’ he said, ‘pict and voice in simulation.’

‘Take it,’ said Kys.

Unwerth nodded to Saintout, who hurried to the comm station and woke the vox bank. The main screen blinked twice and then lit up.

The distorted, blinking view of a woman’s face appeared, peering at them.

‘Hello, *Arethusa*? Hello, *Arethusa*?’ The words came through a yowl of white noise.

Kys lifted the vox mic on its heavy cable. ‘Hello, *Hinterlight*, hello. Mistress Cynia, is that you?’

The fuzzy visual frowned at them. ‘Confirmed. Who am I speaking to? Is that you, Kara?’ More white noise squalled.

‘No, it’s me,’ Kys called into the mic. ‘It’s Patience.’

‘It’s Patience,’ the blur on the viewer said to someone off screen. There was yet more crackle and fuzz. ‘Get me a clean link, Halstrom, for Throne’s sake,’ they heard her say.

The viewer image suddenly sharpened. Kys looked up at the unsmiling, troubled features of Cynia Preest, mistress of the *Hinterlight*.

‘This is an unexpected pleasure,’ said Kys, aware she had tears in her eyes.

‘I imagine you’re surprised to see me,’ said Preest over the speakers. ‘Believe me, you’re not half as surprised as I was a week ago.’

‘What?’ asked Kys.

The image of Preest jumped and fluttered. She glanced sidelong at someone off view and stepped back. A figure moved into her place and looked into the picter with a half-smile.

It was Harlon Nayl.



TWO

THERE WAS A storm coming.

Leyla Slade could hear the brewing grumble of thunder rolling down from the hog's back of dark mountains above Elmingard. The fulminous sky, and the increase in negative ions, made her scratchy and irritable.

It was late afternoon. She stood on the dry, bare stone of the high terrace, and looked down the crag. Elmingard occupied the crown of a buttress of old, black rock, which dropped away, sheer in places, about a thousand metres to the valley below. Down there, only a few kilometres away, there was sunlight and arable land, low hills skirted by woodland, post-harvest fields full of dry straw, the rural belt of southern Sarre, where the headwaters of the Pellitor sprang, about as comfortable and pastoral a tract of land as you could find on any old Imperial world.

Things turned darker and wilder, however, when you reached the abrupt feet of the Kell Mountains. Smaller, surly, westerly cousins to the mighty Atenates that dominated the continental heartland, they rose like a mistake from the undulating countryside of Sarre. Storms fretted around them all year long, as if their thorny backs snagged the passing weather and detained it until it became annoyed. Mists filled the abyssal gorges and steep ravines like uncombed wool. Often, the cloud and haze descended so deeply that the entire range was lost from sight. One could stand in a cornfield ten kilometres away and not know there were mountains there at all.

It was not Leyla Slade's favourite place in the galaxy. Elmingard had been built as a monastic retreat seventeen hundred years earlier, during a period of plague and schismatic war that had marred Gudrun's history. Subsequently, it had been derelict, and then the home of a feral

astronomer. For many years after that it had been the impractical country seat of wealthy Sarrean viticulturists who cultivated vast vineyards in the peaceful country below.

They had died out and departed, defeated by the lonely eminence, and Elmingard had fallen back into disuse, scavenged by the weather.

Orfeo Culzean had purchased it through a chain of faceless middlemen twenty years before. He'd had extensive work done to restore and develop the rambling property, but Leyla still had little love for the place. It had been too many things in its bleak lifetime, and the result was a schizophrenic knot of identities. It was too large, too jumbled, too muddled. The long, austere sections of monastic origin were cold and damp, sagging under patches of sloped grey tile roof that looked like snakeskin. The viticulturists' contributions consisted of dirty, white-stone halls grafted in between the monastic wings, halls that interlocked oddly and had too many storeys. There were stairs and abutting terraces everywhere. The astronomer, in a characteristic act of whimsy, had raised a crude tower of black stone at the north end of the crag, perhaps as an observatory platform. Its construction was not especially sound, and it had become a leaning ruin, but it had never been demolished. Culzean believed it lent Elmingard an 'alchemical charm'.

Slade walked back along the high terrace, under the shadow of the astronomer's tower. Roosting birds clacked and cawed like lost souls. Thick beards of ivy and asterolia covered the face of the grey walls below her.

Culzean and Molotch were arguing in the solar. She could hear their voices. Another storm brewing. They had been arguing for several weeks. Culzean described it to her as 'debate', but she'd seen the growing resentment in the eyes of both men. The essential nature of the 'debate', as far as she understood it, was to agree upon the scheme they would undertake together.

There was the recurring question of Slyte. Since Culzean had first posited the notion of Molotch's relationship with Slyte – and Ravenor – Molotch

had become increasingly obsessed and distracted. He was starting to exhibit what Slade believed was paranoia, pure and simple. He had been gravely disappointed to learn that Ravenor had bluntly rejected Culzean's proposal, as if he had actually been expecting a positive response. He stayed up late into the night, in his room in the dormitory wing, filling up notebooks with rapid, almost feverish penmanship, consulting the library of books and manuscripts that Culzean had imported.

A vast number of books, manuscripts and other esoteric objects filled the rooms and corridors of Elmingard, many of them still in shipping cases, waiting to be unpacked. Culzean had sent for them when he had decided on the place as his latest bolthole, and they had arrived by freight shipment from storage deposits, bank vaults and discreet caches all over the sector. Culzean was a collector of many things, and he magpied away his lifetime's accumulation of arcane ephemera in a thousand separate hiding places for later retrieval.

Only the most valuable items came with him on his travels. Certain potent devices, his 'shining weapons of destiny', certain books of special provenance, certain charts and grimoires. He always carried his small but priceless library of anthropodermic biblioegy – the life stories of significant saints, savants, murderers and heretics bound in the skins of the men themselves, and his collection of deodands. The desperate nature of their flight from Eustis Majoris had forced him to leave his precious deodands in Petropolis, a fact that he still complained about. He had arranged for their private recovery, again through an untraceable chain of anonymous intermediaries, but the caution he had to exercise to procure them meant he probably wouldn't be reunited with the collection for several years.

Slade walked to the solar and peered in through the half-open door. Molotch and Culzean were conversing with some vehemence. For the third day running, the talk had turned to the feasibility of constructing new gnosis engines for a return to Sleef. When Slade had first heard them mentioned, she had questioned Culzean about them privately.

‘Sleef Outworld, Ley.’ he had said. ‘Dirty little mudball, far away from all things good, out in the skirts of Callixes sector.’ ‘Have you been there?’

‘No,’ he said, ‘but I’ve studied various reports. Molotch has been there. It was where Ravenor killed him the first time.’

Leyla Slade had looked at Culzean, puzzled. Culzean had snorted, as if he’d made a fabulous joke. ‘I don’t understand. What’s so wonderful about this place?’

‘There are vents there, Leyla, volcanic vents. They have a special quality. The skin of reality is thin there, Leyla. One can hear the vibration of the Immaterium, just out of reach. The vents speak.’ ‘They speak, do they?’

‘They do. Voices from the warp, mumbling fragments from the daemonverse. With the correct equipment – in this case a very curious and expensive device called a gnosis engine – the voices can be collected and stored.’ ‘For analysis?’

‘Yes, and as a source of infernal power.’

Culzean had then rambled on at length, his terminology becoming more and more technical and arcane, until Leyla was lost. She knew he knew she hadn’t the slightest hope of understanding the workings of the gnosis engine, but he insisted on explaining it. He had even drawn a little sketch for her.

Then he had told her about Ravenor. Molotch had been on Sleef Outworld with several gnosis engines built by the Cognitae, and the Inquisition had arrived to destroy the project. Molotch and Ravenor had battled – they hadn’t even known who each other was – and Molotch had escaped with his life, just.

He had jumped, or fallen, into a vent. A teleport had saved him, but not before he had been caught in an upblast of venting fire. He had been scorched by daemononic energy, injuries that took him a long time to recover from.

Culzean told her he believed that was the moment when Ravenor and Molotch had their destinies linked and placed in the hands of the Ruinous Powers. Through the vents, the warp had scented them, tasted them,

acquired them. The Ruinous Powers had enigmatic plans, plans too long, too involved, and too abstruse for any mortal mind to comprehend. But the powers could see that, before their brief lives ended, Ravenor and Molotch would perform a great service for them.

‘And this service is Slyte?’ she had asked.

‘This service is Slyte, yes,’ he had replied.

Leyla stepped back from the solar door. From what she could hear, Molotch and her master had managed to disagree on the precise configuration of a gnosis engine, and what alloy best served as an inner lining. There was talk of engaging private fabricators, possibly from Caxton or Sarum, at great expense, and a discussion of how the engine would be shipped.

The only thing they seemed to agree on was that the vents of Sleef Outworld might be a conduit through which they could learn pertinent and valuable information about the mysterious Slyte.

Her ear tag pinged, and she left the solar, coming out of the building across a small, walled courtyard, before running up the steps into the central block of the house sprawl.

Thunder grumbled in the sky behind her, and a breeze had picked up, nodding the tight buds of the arid roses that grew in the courtyard. The sky itself, bright yellow in the east, had bruised black with a thunderhead in the west, as if night and day were co-existing in the same sky.

She reached the security control centre. Like many rooms in Elmingard, its crumbling exterior of flaked plaster and patchy stone belied an extensive modern interior. The walls had been panelled with brushed steel plates, and a grilled deck allowed an under floor gap for power cables and data trunking. There were six cogitator desks arranged in a star pattern, all facing into the centre. The machines clacked and hummed, their valve tubes glowing, and their imaging plates rippling with green sine waves. In the centre of the circle, in the heart of the star, was a large, three-sixty degree hololithic display. Each cogitator desk had a vox assembly bolted on to it, linked under the floor to a bulky, high gain vocaster in the corner

of the room. Extractor fans in the ceiling kept the accumulation of machine heat in the room to a minimum.

Drouet and Tzabo, two members of Culzean's hired, immaculately vetted staff were on duty. They wore plain suits of navy blue wool with neat silver buttons.

'Yes?' she asked.

'Incoming transport, mam,' said Drouet.

'Origin?'

'The landing fields at Dorsay. It's broadcasting the correct code fields.'

'How far out is it?' Slade asked.

'Six minutes, mam,' said Tzabo.

'Ask for the final handshake code, and direct it to the landing. I'll be there to meet it.'

The two men nodded, and turned back to their cogitators.

Leyla Slade hurried out of the security room, back out across the courtyard, and began to descend through the rambling labyrinth of Elmingard via terraces, stone staircases, and twisting steps. As she strode along, she opened her link.

'This is Slade. I want three guns to meet me on the landing immediately.'

'Yes, mam.'

She adjusted her link setting and made another connection.

'Leyla?'

'Sorry to disturb you, sir. There's a transport approaching.'

'Any surprises?'

'I'm making sure there aren't.'

She had reached the southern end of the mountain fastness. Beyond the line of the old monastic wall, a large part of the cliff top had been cleared back to form a natural landing pad of granite. She stood facing the landing, looking out at the evening sunlight over Sarre. The monastic wall and the shadow of Elmingard rose behind her, and then the wilder shadows of the mountains. She felt the first few spots of rain in the air. Thunder growled.

Three men in light body armour appeared through the wall gate behind her. They carried lascarbines.

‘Just a precaution,’ she told them. She spoke into her link again. ‘Security control? Arm the wall sentry guns, please. Voice command to me.’

‘Yes, mam,’ the link crackled back.

Slade heard the sentry pods go live over the gusting breeze, and arm with a clatter of autoloaders.

They could see the transport: a light lander, a gig, its running lights bright white like stars in the fading sky as it came head on towards them.

Slade slid out her autopistol, popped the standard clip and switched it for one she carried in her belt pouch, one of Culzean’s special loads. She slammed it home, but she didn’t rack it. You didn’t walk around with something like that in the spout.

The lander swept in, big and dark in the threatening sky, its winglets hooked like the pinions of a stooping hawk. Its nose light was blinking. Its landing claws descended from their hatches with whines audible over the thruster downwash.

The wind picked up on the landing, and the down draught lashed grit up in a wide spiral.

The lander touched down with a final howl of thrusters, its claw struts bending to take its weight. The thruster wash immediately dropped, though the belly lights kept flashing, lighting the rock shelf amber. Slade could see the pilot servitor through the cockpit windows, shutting down systems in the green glow of his instrumentation.

The side hatch opened like petals. A tall, red-haired man in a glass jacket came down the ramp and walked briskly over to Leyla. He was followed more lethargically by the pearl-armoured bulk of Lucius Worna.

‘Stand down, deactivate systems.’ Leyla Slade said into her link.

‘Yes, mam.’

‘Master Siskind.’ she said.

‘My dear Leyla.’ the red-haired man replied with a smile. He leaned in and kissed her on each cheek, ‘You’re looking as radiant as ever.’

Slade couldn’t abide Siskind’s familiarity, but she tolerated it. You didn’t shoot the shipmaster your employer was retaining.

‘A good trip?’ she asked.

He nodded. ‘A bumpy ride in places. Utochre turned into something of a fracas. But all’s done. We made high anchor this morning.’

Worna joined them. ‘Slade,’ he growled.

‘Lucius,’ She changed out the special load from her weapon, replaced it with the standard clip, and put the gun away.

‘Fracas is probably not a word you should use in your report to Orfeo,’ she said to Siskind, ‘not if you’re trying to ingratiate yourself.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ a voice said from behind them. ‘I enjoy a good fracas once in a while.’

Culzean had joined them on the landing. He was wearing a richly embroidered gown of Hesperan silk over a simple black bodyglove. He looked like the hereditary ruler of some ancient mountain satrapy.

‘Sir,’ said Siskind with a smile, shaking his hand. Worna nodded respectfully.

‘So?’ Culzean asked with a cunning smirk. ‘Fracas, wasn’t it?’

‘It all went to hell,’ Worna told him in his deep, bass voice, like a testament of doom. ‘I lost some men. The Wych House got scragged.’

‘You didn’t come out unscathed yourself, I see,’ said Culzean, nodding at the raw, healing weals on Worna’s moonscape face.

‘It’ll heal,’ the bounty hunter replied.

‘But the trap worked?’ Culzean asked. ‘Tell me it worked, after all the trouble we went to.’

‘It worked,’ said Siskind. ‘Ravenor is very, very dead.’

‘End of story,’ said Worna. A smile spread across Culzean’s face. He checked it. ‘We’re sure about that?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Siskind. He gestured back at the lander. ‘We had it confirmed by a very reliable source.’

Siskind’s first officer Ornales appeared from the lander. He was escorting someone at gunpoint.

Her hands were bound, and she had obviously suffered extensively. She was limping and her face was bruised.

‘Her name is Kara Swole,’ said Siskind. ‘Until we got our hands on her, she was one of Ravenor’s principal agents.’

‘Really?’ asked Culzean. His eyes brightened. ‘Of course. Molotch has mentioned her name. How did you come by her?’

‘She penetrated the *Allure* while we were still at anchor over Utochre.’ said Siskind. ‘She was attempting to discover where we were bound, so that the remnants of Ravenor’s team could pursue us in some pathetic attempt at vengeance. However, Lucius and I apprehended her before she could gain access to anything valuable.’

‘This is what she claims?’

‘This is the truth of it,’ said Siskind. ‘I have been... how can I put this delicately? I have been questioning her for several days. My methods are reliable. This is the truth. Ravenor died in the Wych House and the remains of his band are leaderless, divided and lost. I was going to kill her, but I had a feeling both you and Molotch would chastise me for robbing you of a diversion.’

‘You thought wisely, Master Siskind,’ said Culzean. ‘There’ll be a bonus in this for you. Ley, let’s get the cook to produce something special tonight. A welcoming feast, and a celebratory one. Have the lovely Mam Swole secured in the Alcove.’

Slade nodded. ‘This way,’ she said. Dead-eyed, the prisoner limped in the direction indicated.

Leyla Slade almost felt sorry for her. No one deserved to be left in Siskind’s care for days on end.



THREE

‘COME WITH ME,’ said Harlon Nayl the moment Patience stepped through the *Hinterlight*’s airgate. He hugged her tight. ‘Come with me.’

‘There’s too much to—’

‘Just come with me.’

Nayl nodded to Unwerth and the other three crewmen who had come across from the *Arethusa* in the *Hinterlight*’s launch. At Kys’s insistence, no one remained behind on the haunted derelict. Elman Halstrom, Preest’s solid, dependable first officer, a Navy vet, had come to meet them at the airgate with Nayl.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘Master Unwerth, allow me to welcome you to the *Hinterlight*. Perhaps you’d care for some refreshment?’

Nayl led Kys away down the *Hinterlight*’s long access tunnels. The smell, the quality of the lamp light, the stylistic details: it felt almost unbearably familiar to Kys.

‘I thought you were dead,’ she whispered.

‘I thought I was dead,’ he agreed.

‘Why aren’t you dead? Where did you go?’

‘Those are two questions I find it almost impossible to answer, Patience,’ he replied, hustling her along. ‘We went through the door. It was the only escape.’

‘To where?’

‘Places you wouldn’t believe.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I was there, and I don’t frigging believe them,’ he replied.

‘But—’ she began.

‘We’ll get to the but and the why and the what later,’ he said. He led her into the *Hinterlight’s* well-equipped infirmary. The ship’s medicae, Zarjaran, nodded to her. Kys came to a slow halt. She stared.

A vague shape, amorphous, hung suspended in a stasis tube, veiled in a sheen of blue light. The tube apparatus was connected to a wealth of humming, pinging, gurgling mechanical equipment. It looked as if most of the infirmary’s battery of devices had been hooked up to it.

‘Oh, Throne,’ she whispered.

‘He’s resting,’ said Nayl. ‘He’s going to need a long, slow recovery time.’

‘He was in a very poor state when I got to him,’ said the medicae softly, inspecting a few console read-outs. ‘Massive stab trauma, organ failure, necrotisation, exhaustion, secondary and tertiary infections. He’d been out of support for some time while he received emergency surgery. Very rudimentary surgery, in my opinion.’

‘She did her best,’ Nayl said.

Zarjaran shrugged. ‘He arrested all vitals at least three times under her knife but, yes, I think she did.’

Kys stepped forward. She felt numb. She couldn’t really see what was in the tube. It was just a dark blur, but she could feel what was in it.

She reached out her hand and touched the glass. ‘Gideon?’+Patience.+

The send was distant, like a whisper. Tears sprang up in her eyes.+I’m so sorry, Gideon, I’m so sorry! I should not have left you. I should never have —++Shhhhh,+ the whisper sent back.

ZARJARAN INSISTED THEY leave Ravenor to rest. Nayl took Kys up to the *Hinterlight’s* ready room. It was a sumptuous private lounge, as befitted the mistress’s character. Shipmistress Cynia Preest was already there, with Halstrom, entertaining Unwerth and his three crewmen. Cynia Preest was more than two hundred and eighty years old, although she always claimed, not unconvincingly, a much lower figure. She had a womanly, matronly frame, cropped blonde hair, and a penchant for heavy eye make-up and ostentatiously dangly earrings. She was wearing a fine, tailored satin suit

and red velvet robes. An irascible, strong-minded woman, Preest was nevertheless intensely loyal, although her relationship with Ravenor, and her role as a hired servant of the ordos, had become increasingly strained since the incident at Majeskus. After Bonner's Reach, when the *Hinterlight* had been forced to limp away for repairs a second time, they had parted company, partly through necessity. Ravenor had needed to return to Eustis Majoris urgently, and for that reason, the *Arethusa* was hired. Kys had been privately sure that Preest was glad to see the back of them.

The shipmistress showed no sign of that now. She rose as Nayl brought Kys into the ready room, and gave her a maternal hug.

'How are you, my dear?' she asked, as if she really cared.

'Happier than I was. You'll have to excuse me. I haven't washed or changed my clothes in a fortnight.'

'There will be time for that later,' said Preest. 'Have some amasec to steady yourself. Halstrom? Some amasec?'

Halstrom rose to pour the drink. Kys looked around. The entire situation had a dislocated, dreamy quality. Apart from Preest, Halstrom and Unwerth's band, she saw Angharad seated in a corner. The Carthaen was dressed in a plain brown gown. Her intricate leather body armour was laid out like a shed skin across her lap, and she was diligently repairing it with wire thread, a steel needle and a pair of cutters. She didn't spare Kys a second glance.

A young girl sat near to her, prepubescent, wide eyed and strange. She was playing with a key, and laughing to herself.

Halstrom brought Kys her amasec. 'It's good to see you,' he said, and gave her a peck on the cheek as he handed her the drink. She smiled. She had always been fond of the first officer. He was always reassuring, like the father she had never known.

'Tell me what happened,' she said, sitting down with Nayl. The others looked on.

Nayl told her, as best he could. His explanation lasted a long time, and rambled more than once as details failed to make sense until he backed up and explained them. The workings of the door sounded impossible and insane to Kys's ears, and she asked a lot of questions. Angharad, working and not looking up, interjected several times to correct Nayl's facts.

'Finally, we ended up in this place, Rahjez,' said Nayl at length. Preest had just given him a second amasec. 'We were a long way out by then. The Ultima Segmentum, a thousand years out.'

'A thousand?' Kys breathed. 'Back, or-?'

'Back,' said Nayl.

'A thousand long years, a thousand long years,' the child, Iosob, sang, playing with her key. Everyone looked at her. She didn't notice.

'Gideon was in a bad way by then,' Nayl continued, 'close to death. He tried to hide it, but I knew. He'd worked out how to steer us through the door by using his mind, but his mind wasn't strong enough any more. The door was playing games, I think, being deliberately wilful. He'd asked it for the *Arethusa* in 404, and that's where it took us. Listening Station Arethusa, in 404.M40.'

Kys shook her head. 'Go on.'

'We were locked up, as suspected enemy agents. Ravenor's rosette was no use. No one could confirm we were who we said we were, but I convinced them to help Ravenor. There was a medicae, Bashesvili. We owe her a lot.'

'And?'

'I think Ravenor managed to form some kind of bond with her while she worked on him. He got into her mind, and showed her the truth. He persuaded her how important it was for us to get out. He died, technically speaking, several times on her table. Once she had resuscitated him and got him stable, she was able to show a partial monitor record of one of his "deaths" to the station commander. With her key prisoner dead, the commander turned her attention to other priorities. They were expecting a raid.'

'A raid?'

‘There was a war going on. Anyway, it bought Bashesvili enough breathing space to fix up and clean up the chair, get Ravenor back into it, and spring us. By the time the station commander noticed her other prisoners were gone, Bashesvili had got us out of the compound and into the thorns.’

Kys held up a hand. ‘Whoa. The thorns?’

‘Ah, sorry,’ said Nayl. ‘I missed a bit. The Rahjez station was surrounded by psy-active thorn growth. Ki-kid, they called it.’ ‘Ku’kud,’ said Angharad from the back of the room. ‘Get it right, man.’ ‘Ku’kud. That was the key, you see? That was what Ravenor had realised.’ ‘I don’t see,’ said Kys.

‘His mind was too weak by then to operate the door properly,’ said Nayl, ‘but the psy-active weed gave him a boost, an amplifier. He willed us home, and the thorn scrub magnified the thought. He wanted to go back to his ship.’ ‘And this Bashesvili woman?’

Nayl sighed. ‘She had as much desire to be displaced a thousand years out of time as we did. She stayed.’ He paused. ‘So, we opened the door.’

‘I opened the door,’ said Iosob with a giggle, holding up the key. ‘That is my function.’

‘That’s right,’ said Nayl. ‘Iosob very cleverly opened the door, and we stepped through, and we weren’t on the *Arethusa* at all.’ ‘They gave me a bloody scare, I can tell you,’ said Preest. ‘You were on the *Hinterlight*?’ asked Kys.

‘In dry dock anchor, at the Navy Yards at Lenk.’ said Preest. ‘This blooming door had taken your lord and master literally again. It had brought him to his ship, all right. *My* bloody ship.’ ‘How long ago?’ ‘Two weeks ago,’ said Nayl.

‘I’ll tell her this bit,’ Preest cut in. ‘I was walking the rounds one afternoon. We’d just signed off repairs the month before with the Navy architects. I was considering my options, developing plans to open a trade line down to Caxton, small perishables and quality goods, you know the

sort of thing. My dear Patience, the last thing I intended was to get entangled with the Inquisition again.'

'They'd given us some bother,' said Halstrom. He looked at Kys. 'We'd been inspected and interviewed by ordo agents three times. They were aware of our links to your master.' 'The last time was by some high-faulting bitch called – what was it, Halstrom?'

'Inquisitor Lilith,' said Halstrom.

That's the bitch,' said Preest, clapping her hands.

'That's the bitch, that's the bitch!' Iosob sang out, not looking at them.

'Play with your lovely key, dear.' Preest told her. 'This Lilith, she turned up just a few days before this door did. I became very aware that Gideon was a wanted man. I wondered what the bloody hell he'd been up to. Anyway, I told her we hadn't seen him in months. She searched my darling ship, and bugged off. So I was walking the rounds, as I say, and was just going though the enginarium. I'd given the crew some shore leave, a last hoorah before we disembarked, and there shouldn't have been anyone around. Then this bloody voice says out of nowhere—'

'Hello, Cynia,' said Nayl.

'I nearly wet myself,' said Cynia Preest. 'I turned around, and there was your man Harlon, the little girl, the big lass with the sword, and Gideon in his chair, gasping his last. More importantly, there was a brand new wooden door opening out from the left ventricle of the drive assembly.'

'He'd got you home,' said Kys to Nayl. She sighed. 'You know, Kara never doubted him? Kara said he'd beat the odds, even certain death. I didn't believe her. I should have.'

Nayl shook his head. 'In your place, I wouldn't have. We played the longest shot possible, the odds stacked up against us. We went the long way round. I'm still amazed we made it.'

'Is the door still there?' asked Kys.

Halstrom nodded his head. We check on it regularly. Its presence in engineering, the impossibility of it, troubles the crew. If it doesn't disappear in due course, I don't know what we'll do about it.'

Kys rose to her feet. She swayed slightly. 'I'm sorry,' she told them. 'That amasec's gone straight to my head. I haven't eaten much. What I want to know is, after all of that, how in Throne's name did you end up here?'

+Hedgerow birds, pollen and the local constellations.+

'Gideon?' she asked. They could all hear him. Iosob stopped playing, and Angharad looked up sullenly.

+I'm sorry for eavesdropping, and I know I should be resting, but I've come too far to stop now.+

'Birds?' asked Kys.

+Through the door, I met Orfeo Culzean. Remember him? We had a conversation.+

'What kind of conversation?' asked Kys.

+It doesn't matter. We were in a field. I had no idea where, and he wasn't going to tell me, but knew it was wherever he and Molotch had gone to ground. A planet somewhere, in affordable jump distance of Utochre, no more than a subsector or two away at most. There were birds, local flora, evening stars. Once I got here, and the excellent medicae Zarjaran made me comfortable, I started to go back through the records I'd made, comparing them to the *Hinterlight's* extensive database. The asset of having a support chair with perfect recording systems is that you can store things in the most extreme detail, more extreme than a regular mind could remember. I compared star patterns, the cellular detail of crop husks, the patterning of small birds. It took a while, but ultimately, there was no doubt at all.+

'Gudrun,' said Kys.

'We set off immediately,' said Preest. 'I could tell Gideon was in no mood to tarry.'

'Oh Throne, you pinpointed Gudrun by some birds and corn husks?' asked Kys.

+Every planet has its own specific and quite characteristic microculture. And, actually, I didn't pinpoint Gudrun.+

'What then?'

+I pinpointed the Upper Sarre provincial zone of Gudrun, within twenty kilometres of the Kell Massif.+

Kys started to laugh.

‘I knew you’d like that,’ said Nayl, grinning. ‘Now, it’s your turn. What happened to you?’

Kys looked at her empty glass and Halstrom refilled it.

Then she told them everything that had happened since they had broken free of the dying Wych House.

‘ANY RESPONSE FROM Carl or Ballack?’

‘Nothing,’ said Nayl grimly.

‘Not even a hint?’ Ravenor’s repaired voxsponder had a slightly lower, droning quality. They were still getting used to it.

‘Wherever they are, they’re not answering,’ Nayl said.

‘We must tread carefully with Ballack,’ said Ravenor. ‘I’m not sure what he is yet, but he’s hiding something.’

‘Interrogator Ballack is beyond reproach,’ Angharad snapped from the back of the launch’s cabin.

‘No, he’s not,’ said Ravenor. ‘When I was waring him, I found a Black Dam block.’

‘Yes, you do like to ware people, don’t you?’ sneered Angharad. ‘Against their will.’

‘Shut up,’ said Kys. She had showered – for a long time – and was wearing clean clothes, *Hinterlight* crew fatigues that didn’t quite fit. She felt ungainly and unfeminine. She imagined that was how Maud Plyton felt much of the time. The thought of Maud made her tense. ‘Are you sure you’re up to this?’ she asked.

‘He shouldn’t be doing it at all,’ said Nayl.

‘Well, I am,’ Ravenor replied. ‘From what you’ve told me, I haven’t got time to sit around and heal. Mister Halstrom?’

‘Two minutes to dock,’ Halstrom called from the launch’s helm position. He had insisted on piloting them.

‘Thank you.’

Nayl, Kys and a nervous-looking Unwerth sat in the cabin behind him. Ravenor’s chair, repaired but still showing the marks of its damage, sat in the cargo space behind them. Angharad reclined in one of the rear seats. She was wearing her restitched armour, and Iosob had patiently rebraided her hair. None of them had any idea what they should do with the child housekeeper.

Evisorex lay in its scabbard across Angharad’s long legs.

‘A Black Dam?’ asked Kys. ‘That’s a Cognitae technique.’

‘It is,’ said Ravenor. ‘Our friend Ballack was concealing something, something big. It is possible he is the one hiding Slyte.’

‘Nonsense!’ Angharad spat.

‘I tend to agree with obnoxious sword-girl,’ said Kys. ‘It’s Zael. I have no doubt. He’d got to Frauka somehow, turned him. I know what went on aboard the *Arethusa*.’

‘I saw it, in all fair point,’ said Unwerth. ‘Psychic chaos, the breadth of the warp relapsed. If it wasn’t a daemon, I don’t know what.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Ravenor.

Halstrom guided the launch expertly into the *Arethusa*’s docking bay. Automatic systems clamped them in place and folded the hull doors, equalising pressure.

‘We’re good,’ said Halstrom, taking off his headset, unbuckling his harness and turning to look back at them.

‘Mister Halstrom, please stay here. Stand by to leave at a moment’s notice.’

‘Understood, sir,’ said Halstrom.

The others unbuckled their restraints and rose. They clambered down out of the launch’s aft hatch into the echoing docking bay. Nayl held a shotgun. Unwerth fumbled with a laspistol that Preest had lent him.

‘You may stay with the launch, if you like, Master Unwerth,’ said Ravenor as he floated down the ramp.

‘Thank you. I will deblige you, however,’ said Unwerth. ‘I want my ship back.’

They advanced towards the access way. The air, oddly fresh, smelled of cinnamon or fresh-cut grass.

‘Do you feel anything?’ asked Kys. ‘I couldn’t lock him down, but I was too afraid to try. You’re much stronger than me.’

‘Not today,’ said Ravenor. ‘I may have to rely on all of you. In answer to your question, Patience, not yet. I can feel something. I can hear...’

‘What?’ asked Kys.

‘Sobbing. You hear that?’

They turned down one of the *Arethusa*’s empty spinal corridors. The deck lights were still guttering. Angharad pulled out her sword in a fluid movement. ‘Evisorex thirsts.’ she said. ‘I’m sure it does,’ said Ravenor. ‘I’ve got something, something very clear. It feels like... Wystan.’ ‘How can you feel him?’ asked Nayl. ‘He’s a blunter.’ ‘He’s compromised,’ said Kys. ‘I said he was.’ ‘It’s Wystan,’ said Ravenor, ‘or, at least, it’s something that wants us to feel it’s Wystan.’

Kys shuddered. Unwerth looked up at her and calmly held her hand. She looked down at him, saw his nervous smile, and squeezed his hand.

‘How close?’ asked Nayl.

‘Very close,’ Ravenor replied. The forward hold.’

They approached the hold hatch. Unwerth let Kys’s hand go and scurried forwards to key in a code. The hatch groaned. Tutting, Angharad strode up, put her shoulder to the hatch, and slid it slowly open with a grunt. ‘Gotta love her,’ said Nayl.

Kys snorted.

They entered the forward hold. It was empty, derelict. Packing cartons, pulped and shredded, littered the floor space.

‘I hear sobbing,’ said Kys.

They looked up.

Wystan Frauka sat on one of the iron cross beams high up in the hold's roof. How he'd got up there, none of them would ever know. He was sobbing, every breath jagging out of him like a gasp. His upper lip, mouth and chin were wet with blood. It was dripping out of his nose.

'I tried,' he murmured. 'I tried. Protect him you said, and I tried.' He coughed, and blood sprayed from his mouth. Zael hung in his arms like a string-less puppet.

+Wystan?+

'Yes, Gideon?'

+Glory, you can hear me?'+

'Yes, Gideon. That's... that's really frigged up, isn't it? I mean, I'm an untouchable, right?'

'Not any more,' said Ravenor. Frauka sobbed some more. Blood dripped down onto the deck beside them.

+Is he awake?'+

'What?' asked Frauka.

+Is Zael awake?+

'No. Yes. In his head, he is. He has been for a long time.'

'I told them! I told them!' Kys exclaimed.

'Sorry about that, Patience, but if he'd known, he would have killed him.'

'Who?'

'Slyte, of course.'

+Wystan...+

'I had to hide for so long, Chair,' said Frauka, hugging the limp body to his chest with both arms. 'For so long. He was here all the time, and I didn't dare look out. He'd have seen me. He'd have killed me as if I was nothing.'

+It's all right.+

'It's not all right!' Frauka barked. 'I was scared. I was tired of hiding, but he was there all the time. Right there. You couldn't hear me, Chair, or you

didn't want to.'

+I always wanted to.+

'Huh,' said Frauka. 'Well, I woke up once he'd left the ship. When it was safe. I think I scared the crew a bit. I'm sorry I scared them.'

'What the frig is Frauka babbling about?' Nayl asked.

'It's not Frauka,' said Ravenor, 'it's Zael. He's channelling Zael.'

Nayl looked up at the figures perched in the rafters. 'Zael?'

Patience stepped forwards.+Zael? Hello? I need to know something.+

'Hello, Patience. You're pretty,' said Frauka mindlessly.

+Thank you. Zael, if you're not Slyte, who is?+

'Ballack,' said Ravenor emphatically.

'Ballack's nothing,' said Frauka's mouth. 'Slyte's been with us from the start.'

+Zael?+

'Thonius Slyte – Thonius Slyte, Thonius Slyte.' Frauka cackled.

Incremental terror filled Nayl, Kys and Ravenor simultaneously. Disbelief. Horror.

'Watch above!' Unwerth yelled out.

Frauka had slumped forwards, letting Zael's body go. Both of them dropped like stones from the cross beam and plunged towards the hold deck.

+Kys!+

'I've got them.' she said.



FOUR

CARL THONIUS CLIMBED down out of the cargo-8 they had leased at Dorsay. His boots kicked dust up off the rural track. Behind him, Plyton, Ballack and Belknap got out of the vehicle.

They had parked under a stand of trees on a lonely country road. Evening was closing in across the fields. Ahead of them, two kilometres away the sudden, grim bulwarks of the Kell Mountains rose like a threat. They were sheathed in mist and storm cover, almost invisible.

The country around was still and quiet. There was a soft breeze, and the evensong of birds heading to roosts in the woods. But there was a persistent ringing, buzzing sound in Carl Thonius's head, like tinnitus. Carl started to breathe deeply, checking the rings on his fingers. *One, two, three—*

'Up there? Is that the place?' asked Belknap, shouldering the worn, ex-Guard issue lasrifle he had brought.

Plyton nodded. 'I'm sure. The lander left the *Allure* in parking orbit and dropped at Dorsay field. Then it came out here.'

'You're sure?' Belknap asked her, dubiously.

'Magistratum skills, Belknap, trust me,' she said. 'I know how to ask around on the sly, and how to track a suspect vehicle. It came here. The flight path was keyed and logged at the field office.'

'I don't think they know we're here,' said Thonius. 'If they suspected we were right behind them, we'd know it.'

He stared up at the almost invisible summit above them. 'I am going to kill Zygmunt Molotch,' he said in a whisper none of the others heard.

Belknap had crossed to the far side of the track and was playing his electro binoculars at the crags ahead. The lenses whirred and clicked.

None of them had wanted him to come along: they all considered him a non-combatant. But he had insisted, for Kara's sake, while there was still a hope. None of them could argue with that.

'Big place up there,' Belknap said, squinting through his field glasses, 'like a palace. We'll have to get closer for me to make anything definite.'

'Then let's get closer,' said Thonius.

'I still can't raise the *Arethusia*,' said Ballack, shaking his vox link. 'What the hell's up with that?'

'Atmospherics,' said Thonius. 'There's a storm coming in down the mountains.'

'I couldn't raise them in Dorsay either,' said Ballack.

'Atmospherics,' Thonius repeated. 'They're all right, sitting pretty. What's important is down here. Let's spread out and scope the area.'

They fanned out. Plyton and Belknap followed the track down to fields. Ballack and Thonius followed parallel paths into the creaking woods. They could feel the pressure of the gathering storm. The boughs sighed and groaned as the wind stirred them. Leaves fluttered. The rot-dry husks of wind-felled trees attested to the power that local storms could develop.

Carl Thonius came to a halt in a sighing glade. The others were out of sight. He could see the mountains a little better through the swaying branches ahead of him than from the road. They were a black shape smeared in cloud. Behind them, the sky was clean and ochre, stippled with stars.

The buzzing had grown worse. Thonius realised his right hand was shaking. He forced it to be still. He had come to regret many things in these last days of his human life, and the strangest regret of all was that he hadn't left his right arm in the cattle pen on Flint.

He had been trying so hard for such a long time, but he knew it was beating him. It was just a matter of time. The dark energy within him was like a grotesque pressure. He felt like an over-boiled kettle, rattling on a stove burner. At any moment he could burst.

He'd come close to bursting too many times. At Berynth, when he'd killed the man. Then again, by necessity, when they were trapped on the wrong side of the door and facing the hooked monsters. Letting slip his power had been the only thing that had saved them. At that moment, he'd been just a sliver of willpower away from letting go altogether. Such a terrible glee had filled him, and Throne, such temptation! To just give in, to let himself go to the turmoil inside his soul.

It would be so nice to let it stop. To cave in and surrender, and not have to fight any more. The buzzing would stop, the whispers, the pain.

Two simple thoughts kept him focused. One was that he was an Imperial interrogator. He had fought for that post, worked hard for it. The Carl Thonius part of him wanted to serve, wanted to prove himself true. How odd, he considered, that a man inhabited by a daemon might remain so devoted, give or take the odd little slip. Thonius had a dream, an ambition. He believed he had a power inside him that the whole Imperium could benefit from, but if he showed it to his masters before he could control it, they would execute him. They would exterminate him without hesitation. The buzzing in his head chuckled mockingly every time he dwelt on that ambition.

He could hear it again. *Heh heh heh.*

The other simple thought was that he didn't want to die, Not again, not like before, on Eustis Majoris. He really didn't. However much giving in might appeal, he did not want to die.

There was only one more option left open to him. It was up there, in the sulking mountains, Throne willing: Molotch. If Ravenor couldn't help him nurse and control the entity lodging inside him, then the arch-heretic would find a way. Molotch had skills and knowledge, and Molotch was not bound by the moral constraints and edicts of the ordos.

He would face Molotch, and force him to give up his secrets. Then he would kill him, in an action of sweet vengeance for his beloved master.

And then... and then...

Thonius convulsed. He dropped to his knees. The psychic force of his seizure rocked the trees around him. Loose leaves swirled and fluttered.

‘What the hell was that?’ Belknap asked over the link. ‘Did anyone else feel that?’

‘Carl?’ Ballack called out through the woods.

Thonius threw up weakly his last meal splattering across the track as oily liquid. Syncope overtook him and he fell on his side. His vision went. He could hear voices and buzzing.

‘Carl? Are you all right?’ Plyton’s voice echoed from far away.

Eat her, eat her now, eat her up, she’s so plump and delicious. Let go and let me go, Carl. I want to be out. I want to be out—

‘No,’ he moaned. He had never felt so lost. His heart was empty. His soul was sloshing full of black poison. His body ached. His right hand twitched. A ring broke and pinged off. *Fight it, fight it...*

‘Carl?’

His vision slowly returned. Thonius sat up, bilious and swimming.

‘I’m all right, Maud,’ he said into his link hoarsely. ‘Just a bad case of ague. It’ll pass.’

Leave me alone, Slyte. Leave me alone. I won’t let you out, not again. I won’t. I will beat you.

He heard mocking laughter, thready and thin, at the back of his mind.

I will beat you. Molotch will know how.

He heard footsteps coming closer. They sounded like the padding footsteps of the fiend itself.

‘Throne, Carl, were you sick? Are you all right?’

It was Ballack.

‘I’m fine,’ said Carl Thonius, rising and wiping his mouth. Ague. I always suffer from the ague.’

Ballack placed a comforting arm around Carl’s shoulders, and wiped Carl’s chin with his handkerchief. ‘You’ll be all right, my friend. Dry food and boiled water, that’s the best remedy for ague.’

‘The things you know,’ said Thonius.

THEY TRUDGED UP through the farmland towards the Kells. Light was fading fast, and a storm boomed out over the crags ahead of them. Ballack tried the link one last time.

‘Absolutely nothing from the *Arethusa*,’ he grumbled.

Now they were closer, Belknap fixed the crag with his electro binoculars. ‘A thousand-metre cliff. There’s definitely some kind of building at the top, a real sprawl.’

‘How does anyone get up there?’ asked Plyton.

‘They land by flier,’ said Belknap, lenses whirring. ‘I see a flier parked on the lip of the cliff. They’ve chained it down to weather out the storm. Oh yeah, I can see a winch too, on the east side of the promontory. Heavy duty. A big chain cage they can crank to bring up foot traffic from the fields. It’s on the left side of the cliff. See?’

He passed the field glasses to Plyton. ‘Like a hoist?’ she asked.

‘Yeah.’

‘I’ve done enough hoists for this life,’ she replied.

‘We climb,’ said Thonius.

‘Up that?’ Plyton laughed.

‘Yes,’ said Thonius.

‘We’re rushing this,’ said Plyton. ‘We have no idea what’s up there. We should surveil it properly. Maybe get up in the crags to the west there,’ she pointed. ‘I don’t like the idea of just charging in. We need to bed down and watch the place, measure what we’re up against.’

‘I agree,’ said Ballack. A few days, and once we’re sure—’

‘I don’t have a few days,’ said Thonius.

‘What?’ asked Ballack, brushing back strands of long white hair that the wind had blown across his face. Thonius realised what he had said.

‘We don’t have a few days,’ said Thonius.

‘No, we don’t,’ said Belknap. He put his field glasses back in their worn case. ‘If Kara’s alive—’

‘Hell with Kara!’ snapped Ballack. ‘This is too important to—’

Belknap held his rifle out to Plyton.

‘Hold this, Maud.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’ll shoot him otherwise.’

She took the gun. Belknap moved with breathtaking speed. His fist smashed into Ballack’s mouth.

‘I’ll tell you what’s important, you bastard,’ Belknap said, glaring down at the prone interrogator. ‘Kara. Kara, Kara, *Kara*. Stay here, if you like. I’m going up there.’

‘Madman!’ Ballack coughed, spitting out blood.

‘That’s enough,’ snapped Thonius. Quietly, he was impressed by Belknap’s reactions. Quite apart from his speed and power – it was easy to forget that the doctor was a veteran soldier first and a medic second – Belknap had acted out of loyalty, love and friendship. Those were the only things that mattered any more. Belknap was on his side.

‘Let’s not fight amongst ourselves,’ Thonius said. He held out his right hand to haul Ballack up, and then, at the last moment, proffered his left hand instead. ‘Come on.’

‘I’m sorry, doctor,’ Ballack said as he was helped up. ‘I spoke without thinking. Of course Kara is a priority.’

Belknap grunted and took his weapon back from Plyton.

‘We go up,’ said Thonius. ‘I know a few days’ surveillance would prepare us better, Maud, but we can’t afford it. Kara, bless her soul, can’t afford it. If she’s alive.’

‘She’s alive,’ said Belknap grimly. Plyton touched his arm reassuringly.

‘We can’t do this by the book,’ said Thonius. ‘We can’t even call for backup. So we go in tonight.’

Belknap nodded. Plyton sighed.

‘Say we do,’ said Ballack, fingering his split lip ruefully. ‘How? That’s a thousand metres sheer.’

‘We climb,’ said Thonius.

‘Again,’ snorted Plyton, ‘up that?’

‘There are several routes,’ said Thonius. ‘Cliff pathways. I can—’

‘You can what?’ asked Ballack.

‘I can see them,’ Thonius replied, pointing. ‘There, there, and there.’

Belknap took out his binoculars again and adjusted them. ‘Yeah, he’s right. Well spotted, Carl. How the hell did you see them?’

Thonius shrugged.

‘Pathways?’ asked Plyton.

‘There are at least three routes up the cliff, east and west,’ replied Belknap. ‘They’re treacherous and steep, but they’re a way in. If we survive the climb in the storm that’s about to break over us.’

‘Big if,’ shuddered Plyton.

Belknap looked over at Thonius. ‘What’s the plan?’

‘We go up, we get in. We... I dunno, kill things?’ said Thonius. ‘Let’s get up there first.’

‘I think we should—’ Ballack began. The other three were already marching off down the field through the enclosing dusk.

‘All right,’ Ballack said. ‘We’re going. I get that. Wait for me.’



FIVE

ORFEO CULZEAN OPENED the door to the Alcove. The sounds of a party rang in after him from a terrace high above.

‘They’re having fun,’ said Kara Swole.

‘They are, aren’t they?’ Culzean agreed.

‘Now you come for me,’ she said. ‘More fun?’

He closed the heavy black door of the room behind him and shut the sounds out. ‘Oh, don’t be like that. It doesn’t have to be like that.’

‘You intend to torture me,’ said Kara. She was shackled, painfully tight, to a wooden chair. It was the very same chair Culzean had sat on during his conversation with Ravenor in the cornfield.

‘Torture is too strong a term,’ said Culzean. The Alcove was a dark, dank space in the lower reaches of Elmingard, more a cell than anything. Culzean believed it had been used by the monks, ages past, when they withdrew to meditate. Experimental séances also suggested that this was the place where the astronomer’s servants had locked him on the days when his madness ran particularly wild. Culzean had made it his own, a private sanctum. Not even Molotch was allowed in here. Age-browned specimen skeletons hung from racks, their connective tissues replaced by intricate brass hinges and pins, every bone numbered and serialized in ink. All of the specimens belonged to freaks of nature: a giant, two encephalitic dwarfs, conjoined twins, a canine with a human skull, and other things too misshapen to identify. They were just fused masses of bone and calcification. Fat glass jars sat on shelves full of diseased viscera, tumours, xenotype organs, and pickled animals, blanched white like albinos in the preserving fluids.

Culzean walked over to a chest of drawers and began rifling through the contents.

Kara stared at her captor. 'Let me tell you, Orfeo... you are Orfeo Culzean, aren't you?'

'I am.'

'Uh huh,' she nodded, her lips cut and swollen. 'Look, Orfeo, I understand what you are. I know what you want. I have spent a week being tortured by that animal Siskind. He had Worna's help. He was skilled. I have nothing left to tell.'

'The thing is,' said Culzean, 'I actually believe you. Siskind is third generation Cognitae. He has tremendous invasive skills, and Worna, well, Worna is Worna. I am truly sorry for you, the pains you must have endured, but the thing is, the thing is, I think you might know more than you think you know.'

'I don't. Just kill me,' Kara begged. 'Please don't hurt me any more. In the name of—'

'Kara, I don't intend to,' said Culzean. He drew something out of one of the drawers. 'Do you know what this is?'

'I can't imagine.'

'It's a kinebrach ocular. See?'

He held it out in front of her. He showed her the head brace, and made the coloured lenses flip and exchange.

'Surprisingly timid, the kinebrach, very cautious. Humanoid forms, about so high,' he held out his hand in indication. 'They liked to know what was coming. Of course, they're long dead, so maybe this device has its limits, although I like to think that, through such instruments, they saw their impending doom. Anyway, where was I? Ah yes. You look into this and...'

He paused. 'Kaleidoscopes. I had a kaleidoscope when I was a boy,' he said. 'Did you?'

'I was a girl.'

'Funny, Kara. Did you? A kaleidoscope?'

‘Yes.’

‘Great, weren’t they? The shuffling and the clattering? I loved that. I saw the galaxy through mine. What did you see, Kara?’

‘Pretty patterns.’

‘A kinebrach oculous is very like that. It doesn’t hurt. It just shows you the truth. Pretty patterns of truth.’

Kara made a tiny moan.

Both of them jumped as Culzean’s link chimed. Taking it out of his pocket, Culzean looked at Kara and laughed.

‘My, my! Tense, aren’t we? Must be the storm.’ He put the link to his ear. ‘Yes, Leyla?’

‘We’re tracking someone. A warm hit on the crag paths below us.’

‘A shepherd, probably.’

‘No, Orfeo,’ the link crackled. ‘I’m waiting for confirmation, but I think we have a genuine bio-sign fix.’

‘An identity? Who’s coming to call at this late hour, Ley?’

‘Try Carl Thonius.’

Culzean blinked. ‘Track him. Arm the sentry guns and track him, Leyla. Call me back the moment you have that confirmation.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Culzean closed the link. He looked back at Kara Swole.

‘You got a message off to your people, didn’t you? Oh, you clever girl. You clever, pretty girl... and you hid that from Siskind and Worna so well. What else are you concealing, Kara? Ravenor’s real fate, perhaps?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘That part is true.’

‘There’s something,’ said Culzean gently, bending down to peer into her eyes. She could smell his sweet, clean breath and his hair oil. His eyes were almost kind, almost concerned for her well-being. ‘I can see it in you... something...’

‘Nothing.’

He peered closer, until the tips of their noses were almost touching. ‘I have been reading the languages of the body, face and eyes for years, far longer than Siskind. He missed this, but I can see it. There’s something wrapped up in that head of yours.’

‘Please... I swear there’s nothing else.’

He rose. With steady, gentle hands, he fitted the kinebrach device around her head, dropping the coloured lenses over her eyes, and arranging them carefully. The iron scalp brace sat like a barbarian’s crown on her red hair. He buckled the straps under her chin. Content with the preparations, he stood back and stared at her.

‘Relax,’ said Culzean. ‘Let it do all the work.’

Nothing happened for a moment. Kara sat, stock-still, tensed for the worst. Then she began to twitch her head slightly every few seconds, flinching a little, as if to avoid some flying insect buzzing at her face.

‘Kara?’

She murmured something. Her twitching became more accentuated. Her body jumped and jolted, like a blindfolded person tormented by sounds darting about around them.

‘Make... make it stop,’ Kara said, her voice wobbling.

‘Only when we’re done,’ said Culzean. He placed a hand on her left shoulder to steady her. ‘Look directly into it. Stop flinching away.’

‘No...’

‘Do it, please.’

She began to tremble. The tremble was so spastic, it seemed to be prefiguring a grand mal seizure.

‘Oh!’ she cried. ‘Oh! Oh Throne! Oh Emperor!’

‘What do you see?’ Culzean asked. She made a choking, gagging sound in her throat, as if she was about to retch. She writhed in the restraints.

‘Tell me,’ he soothed.

‘I remember! I remember!’ Kara Swole shrieked. ‘Carl!’

Then she began to scream.

ON THE LOWER south terrace of Elmingard, Siskind was celebrating. All of Culzean's people not on duty that night had assembled. There were about twenty-five in all – hired guns, savants and technical experts, and some of the senior domestics. They had taken dinner in the long room over the terrace, and had come out onto the terrace with drinks in their hands to watch the storm begin its slow, lusty tumble down the nightscape of the mountains.

In a half hour or so, conditions would be too fierce and wet for them to remain outside, but just then there were only a few big raindrops in the air, propelled by the gathering wind. The revellers gathered amongst the fluttering taper lights, and enjoyed the building light show of the storm. Lightning, blue-white and vivid, lanced around the crags of the hog's back, fixing its silhouette against the bleak night sky. Sheet electrics, a foggy, blinking radiance, underlit the bunching cloud wall.

Siskind had already drunk too much. In a voice louder than any of the jovial voices on the north terrace, he was regaling some of the staff members with the tale of Ravenor's demise. Worna, a bottle of amasec in his fist, sat aloof at the end of the terrace, regarding the pitch black drop into the flat country below.

Molotch appeared beside him. He was dressed in black with only his head and hands exposed. He loomed, like a spectre.

'A notable night,' Worna rumbled, as if the thunder was speaking through him.

Molotch half nodded.

'An achievement,' Worna added, taking a sip from his bottle. He offered it to Molotch, but Molotch shook his head. Worna shrugged and said, 'I know this is a result you have longed for these many years. Your enemy is dead.'

'Yes,' said Molotch.

'You are pleased, then, sir?' Worna asked.

'I am trying to allow myself a feeling of triumph,' said Molotch quietly. 'I certainly thank you and the shipmaster for your sterling efforts. Ravenor

has, as you remark, dogged me for more years than I care to recall. I have wished him dead so many times, yearned for it. I suppose now it is actually true, it feels like an anti-climax. It is often the way with things that are sought after for so long. Compared to the effort, the victory seems barren.'

Worna grunted. 'I know that one. Hunting a mark for months or years, and when you finally get the strike, it feels hollow and empty, but there's more to this, isn't there, if you don't mind me asking?'

Molotch glanced at the ancient bounty hunter and smiled an asymmetrical smile. 'You amuse me, Lucius. For all your brute demeanour, you exhibit a perceptive mind. Yes, there is more to this.'

Molotch looked away as a particularly violent jag of lightning seared the peaks above. It seemed as if he was unwilling to say anything further.

Then he glanced back at Worna and said, 'There are dark days ahead, you see, Lucius, dark even by our standards. Through Orfeo, I made Ravenor an offer. I have no love for him, you understand, but he was a very capable being. I believed that, together, we might avert the oncoming darkness. Ravenor chose to reject my offer. Now he is dead, and in no position to reconsider it. So, I suppose, I mourn his death as much as I celebrate it.'

Worna shrugged. 'I dunno,' he considered, 'the crippled bastard was the enemy, when all was said and done.'

'There is another enemy,' said Molotch. He looked around. 'Where's Culzean? He usually enjoys this kind of merriment. I haven't seen him since the end of the meal.'

Worna shook his scarred head. He felt awkward. Culzean had ordered him firmly not to tell Molotch about the prisoner, and he found it extremely uncomfortable keeping secrets from Molotch. There were very few things in the forsaken galaxy that Lucius Worna was afraid of, but Zygmunt Molotch made the cut.

'He'll be back, I'm sure,' Worna said. 'He's probably checking something.'

LEYLA SLADE LEANT over Drouet's cogitator post in the security control centre, watching the multiple images drifting and switching on the hololithic projection.

'That's definitely Thonius,' she said.

'Bio-print confirms,' Drouet said.

'Pinpoint, please.'

Drouet adjusted some of the cogitator's controls. 'West flank of the cliffs, between markers thirty-six and thirty-seven,' he replied. 'That's about sixty metres shy of the summit. I've got him painted by three motion and pict scanners. Positive ID. If he continues unchecked, he'll make west low terrace in under ten minutes. I thought he was supposed to be a principal agent, mam?'

'Why do you say that?'

Drouet shrugged. 'He's not exactly moving with any skill or subtlety. It seems to me it's taking all his effort just to climb the cliff. Doesn't he realise we've got him cold?'

Leyla leaned in closer. 'Have we got a gun on him yet?'

'Sentry 18 will acquire him in about three minutes. He must know we can see him, surely? He must realise Elmingard is locked down tight with scanners and trips?'

'Apparently not.' Slade replied. 'I think our friend Thonius has underestimated our capabilities. Load sentry 18. Track and fix, and fire on my command.'

'Yes, mam.' said Drouet.

'Mam?' Tzabo called from his machine. She crossed to him. 'I've found another. Confirmed sensor hit. Eastern side, a little closer than target one.'

'Show me.'

'He's in deep shadow, and partially concealed. I'll punch up night scoping and enhance.'

An image – just a portion of a profile boosted by low-light enhanciles – flickered onto the 'lith projection.

‘Know him?’ asked Tzabo.

‘No, I...’ Slade paused. ‘Shit, that’s Ballack! Frig it, he’s supposed to be dead! Molotch killed him on Tancred!’

‘Not with any lasting success, it would appear,’ said Tzabo.

‘Is he ranged?’ Slade asked.

‘He will be in twenty-five seconds at current rate of advance.’

‘Get me—’ she began. Her link beeped.

‘Slade,’ she answered, pulling the device out of her pocket.

‘Ley, it’s me,’ Culzean’s voice floated back. There was a strange, muffled yelping sound coming through behind him.

‘What’s going on?’ Slade asked. ‘I can hear—’

‘Ignore the background fuss.’ Culzean replied. ‘The lovely Kara just had an epiphany, and she’s getting over it. Ley, tell me quickly, have you confirmed Thonius?’

‘Bio-trace and visual,’ she said. ‘Definitive match. Palpable. Get this, we’ve also got Ballack coming up for a visit.’

‘Ballack? Really?’

‘I’d wager my reputation, sir.’

‘Listen to me, Leyla, and listen carefully. I want them taken alive, especially Thonius.’

‘What?’

‘I’m deadly serious, Ley. Do this for me, and do it discreetly. Knock your systems back to passive before they realise they’re being targeted.’

‘Orfeo, that’s madness! The sentry guns are seconds away from acquiring them both. I can hose them off the rocks!’

‘No! I want Thonius brought in alive, you understand me? Alive. Do it personally, if you have to. Get him into custody, immediately and quietly. Make sure Zygmunt doesn’t know anything about it.’

‘This has a bad feel to me,’ she warned.

‘Leyla, I love you, but this is one of those times when you act like a good girl and do exactly what I frigging well tell you. Go passive, shut the

system back, get Thonius alive. Ballack too, the silly little fool, but I don't care so much if you have to top him. Are we clear?

Leyla Slade breathed tightly. 'Totally, sir.' she said.

She clicked off her link, and put it away.

'Cut to passive running,' she told Drouet and Tzabo. 'Turn off the sentries.'

They looked at her. 'Mam, are you sure?' asked Tzabo.

'We've got Throne agents crawling up the rock face,' Drouet added.

'I know what I've been told,' snapped Slade, pulling her handgun out and arming it. 'Do as I say.'

Eyebrows raised, the two security experts obliged, throwing a series of switches that set the Elmingard defences to passive. The powerful sentry gun servitors went to dormant status.

'Now what?' asked Tzabo.

'Get two guns up here to join me. I'm going to greet Master Thonius. Drouet, can you handle Ballack when he shows his face?'

Drouet got to his feet and checked his laspistol. 'Certainly,' he said. 'Alive?'

'If possible,' she said.



SIX

THE RAIN WAS in his face, and the whole world was black. Shuddering with cold and effort, Carl Thonius clambered a few metres more up the steep rock track. It was a sheer climb in places where the path fell away, nothing like the simple ascent he had envisioned. The laughing, buzzing thing in his soul had lied about that.

He hauled himself up over an overhang, straining with arms alone, his legs dangling. The darkness yawned below him. If his numb fingers let go, it would be a long, final drop. Overhead, the breaking storm boomed. The rock was wet.

Heh heh heh.

He pulled himself up onto the overhang and lay there for a moment, panting. Rain fell on his face.

He'd lost touch with the others. At the base of the crag, they'd split up, deciding to optimise their chances. Thonius had gone up the western path he'd identified. Ballack had taken the east face. Plyton and Belknap had chosen to work their way up the ravine behind the Elmingard plateau, to see if they could find a way up from the north.

Thonius resumed his climb. Conditions were awful and getting worse, inside and out. The storm was closing in. His own storm was closing in. Fire and buzzing laughter licked at his mind. He tried to force it back, but it sizzled at his thoughts and burned back his memories. Pain shot through him, making him gag and lose his grip. Nausea yawned. He could hear a voice inside him sniggering at his puny, mortal efforts to survive and stay human. Buzzing, buzzing... *heh heh heh.*

His scanner pad bipped, and he pulled it out to check it. The pad showed him the contact prints of several scanner pods built into the rock face

above. They read as passive. That was good. Lucky, in fact. He'd expected serious electronic countermeasures, an active system, probing and stabbing at them as they came up, but a passive system was easy to beat.

Perhaps Molotch was getting slack in his old age. No one was expecting them. Thonius drew himself up and clambered on.

THE RAIN HAD begun in earnest, driving the partygoers indoors. Out on the lower north terrace, the tapers sputtered and fizzled as the downpour extinguished them. Siskind's first mate, Ornales, closed and bolted the double doors once they were inside.

Siskind was ordering more drinks, and there was laughter in the room. Off in one corner, Molotch had been drawn into deep conversation with two of Culzean's most learned savants. They were ancient, robed individuals, their bald heads like heavy ivory balls.

Worna stayed outside the activity, watching. He had never been one for hellraising and drink, unless it was with his own kind, and the members of his team that he'd managed to pull out of the Utochre mess were all still aboard Siskind's ship. These people were not his type: intellectuals, savants, Culzean's brand of people. Even the hard-bodied men in blue wool suits with silver buttons who acted as security were not Worna's sort. They were good, Worna acknowledged, but they were young. Guard-vets mostly, a few high-end underworld recruits, well drilled and well made. None of them had the grizzled edge of experience that a bounty life provided. They regarded him with curiosity, but he knew they thought he was low-life scum. 'Scum' barely covered what Lucius Worna thought of them.

The only person around that he had the vaguest sense of connection with was Culzean's minder, Slade. He liked her. She hadn't had the same career path as him, but she was good, professional and dedicated. He'd seen her work. She was a kindred spirit, or as close to a kindred spirit as he was likely to find in this blasted house at the end of the world.

He left Siskind's party quietly and slipped out into the draughty corridor. He'd been privately scanning the vox net for the past few minutes, and he'd heard some tantalising stuff on the back and forth. Something was up.

GALL BALLACK HAULED himself up over the lip wall of one of the eastern terraces. The rain was sheeting down, like a white curtain. He was soaked, and chilled to the bone. His long white hair hung lank and wet, and water streamed down his face.

The place was empty and unlit. He could smell wet stone and wet earth, and hear nothing but the hiss of the rain.

He rose, and glanced around. His pad showed no sign of active sensor noise. Parched rosebushes nearby fluttered and shook in the night's wind and rain. He looked up. Several levels above him, in the inner knot of the ancient house, lights glowed behind shuttered windows. He stepped forwards across flagstones so worn and uneven that rainwater had collected in deep, angular puddles.

Another step, another. It looked like there was a staircase ahead, a flight of steps cut in the terrace side, which might afford him access to the next level of the haphazard palace.

'I suggest you stop there,' said Drouet, stepping out of the rain and the shadows behind him, a laspistol raised and aimed.

Ballack froze and slowly, resignedly, raised his hands. 'Throne, you're good. I didn't even hear you,' he said.

Drouet came closer. 'On the ground. Down on the ground, face down,' he instructed sharply. 'Hands where I can see them!'

'Hands?' asked Ballack, bitterly.

'Get down!'

Ballack lay down on his face, smelling the wet rock close up. Rainwater streaked off him.

'I have to see Molotch,' Ballack said.

'Shut up.'

‘It’s a matter of the most pleasant fraternal confidence,’ Ballack tried. It stood to reason that Molotch might employ other Cognitae.

‘Whatever you say,’ said Drouet. Clearly, he was not of the brotherhood.

‘Tell him that, then,’ said Ballack. ‘Use those exact words, and he’ll—’

‘Shut up,’ Drouet spat, standing over him. He bent down and began to frisk Ballack. The interrogator felt the muzzle of the laspistol poke at the back of his head.

‘One move from you I don’t like,’ Drouet told him, ‘you’ll be scraping your brains up with a trowel.’

‘You paint a vivid picture.’ Ballack grunted. Unamused, Drouet pushed harder with the gun and Ballack’s face banged into the flags, chipping one of his teeth. The lip cut Belknap had given him began to bleed again.

Drouet found Ballack’s weapon, tugged it out, and tossed it away into the rain and darkness over the wall.

‘Roll over,’ Drouet instructed.

Ballack obeyed. Flat on his back, he stared up into the sheeting downpour at the man standing over him. Ballack blinked the rain away.

‘Get me inside,’ he said. ‘Take me to whoever is in charge.’

‘Shut the frig up,’ said Drouet, aiming his weapon and taking out his link.

The one-shot las was a small device, just a tube, and Ballack had fitted it to the stump of his wrist, just behind the cuff. It was so small that a cursory pat down wouldn’t find it. He swung his arm up, popped the tube forwards on its spring catch with a flex of his forearm, and fired the shot. Its bark was lost in a thump of thunder.

Drouet smacked backwards. The shot had punched in under his chin and gone up through his skull. The entry wound made a neat, fleeting black hole that closed again into a tiny blemish as tissue shock rippled across the flesh of his throat. The back of his head came off in a spray of blood and tissue.

He fell back, slumping against the terrace wall and almost pitching off. Then he fell down heavily. Thick, acrid smoke billowed up from the exit

wound in the back of his cranium. What remained of his ruptured brain was still cooking and burning. His limp legs began to spasm and thump.

Ballack got up. He took hold of Drouet, dragged the twitching corpse upright, and then pushed it over the wall into the night.

Drouet plummeted away into the blackness below.

Ballack retrieved Drouet's pistol, and snapped the one-shot back into its holder. I'll recharge it later, he thought as he turned.

A steel fist ploughed him down. It came out of nowhere and piled into the side of his face, smashing most of his teeth. Ballack went over so violently that he almost inverted, his legs flying up. He crunched onto the puddled flagstones.

Gasping, blood pouring from his mouth, he reached out to grab his fallen weapon. The moment his fingers took hold of it, a pearl-armoured boot stamped on it and crushed it to pieces. The laspistol cracked and fractured, its power cell shorting wildly as it met the rain. All the bones in Ballack's remaining hand broke and mashed.

Ballack screamed in agony, aspirating blood out into the drenching downpour.

'Ballack,' said Lucius Worna. 'We meet again.'

'Nyaaaahh!' Ballack wailed as Worna ground his boot down harder to emphasise the point.

'Guess what?' asked Worna, drawing his bolter.

'Hnhhh?'

'End of story.'

CARL THONIUS CLAMBERED over the west wall and dropped two metres onto the flagged yard. The rain was extreme, affording zero visibility. Lightning flashed, brighter than even lightning ought to be. A second later, thunder smashed like a daemon's drum.

Beating for me, beating for me...

He pulled out his weapon. It was going to be a tight call, but he was here. This was where it would play out. Molotch would save him, or Molotch

would—

Carl blinked. His gun was no longer in his hand. It had been kicked out of his grip. A woman came at him through the streaming rain. He side-stepped, and they circled one another.

‘Hello,’ she said, brightly. ‘You’re Carl, right? Carl Thonius?’

‘Who do I have the pleasure of addressing?’ he replied, courteous to the end.

‘My name is Leyla Slade. I’d like you to come with me, Carl. Quietly.’

‘Oh, dear,’ he said. ‘I might not be able to do that.’

She shrugged and wheeled immediately into a spin kick that almost took his head off.

No wonder his gun had gone flying.

Thonius ducked the kick, and circled again. The woman, Slade, kicked out twice in a rotating one-two, her powerful legs punching like pistons, but he evaded both strikes.

‘Come on, Carl,’ she taunted. ‘I thought you were good?’

‘I am,’ he answered.

He threw a side-kick feint at her, followed by a lateral jab. She back-stepped out of the former, reading the feint for what it was, and blocked the latter, but he had momentum, and he drove a rapid sequence of killing punches at her. She blocked them all with stinging claps of skin on skin, and managed to wrong-foot him. Pirouetting off the ground, she kicked out a response and caught him square in the chest.

His breath left him in a bark and he staggered backwards. Then he dropped into a quick defensive stance, trying to recover. His chest hurt. He lunged forwards, low and fast, risking a sternum punch.

She met the punch with a high, deflecting kick, and countered with a blade fist, which he barely slapped aside. He switched right with another feint and drove at her throat with a needle fist, but she was too quick for him to catch.

‘I think I love you, Leyla Slade,’ he panted.

‘They all say that,’ she retorted. They were circling again.

‘I think you should know something,’ Thonius added.

‘What might that be?’

‘Knocking me insensible is probably the last thing you want to do.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if I’m unconscious, I won’t be able to concentrate any more.’

‘I’ll take my chances,’ she said.

They leapt at each other, simultaneously, their attacks clashing and overlapping. There was a meaty crack of flesh and bone as one was successful. Slade landed squarely. Thonius fell hard. His body rolled limply across the rain-slick flagstones.

Breathing hard, Slade opened her link. ‘Got him,’ she said, over the hissing rain.

Overhead, the thunder roared, as if in approval.



SEVEN

CULZEAN LEFT THE Alcove and hurried out into the drafty gloom of the corridor. ‘This way, this way!’ he hissed as Slade and Worna approached. Worna had Ballack’s body slung over his wide shoulder plate. Slade was dragging Thonius. ‘Fine work, my friends.’ Culzean said. ‘Did anybody see you?’ Slade shook her head.

‘Your man Drouet’s dead,’ Worna grumbled. ‘Ballack shot him. Lucky for you, I was close by.’ ‘Where shall we put them?’ Slade asked.

‘We can lock Ballack up in the under pantry,’ Culzean said. ‘First we make Thonius secure. Bring him this way.’ ‘What’s so important about Thonius?’ Slade asked. ‘Never mind.’

‘Why are we hiding this from Molotch?’ Worna growled. ‘Never mind that either. Come on.’

They moved away down the stone corridor until they were out of sight. The rain beat down, and drools of rainwater seeped into the lower structures of Elmingard. Maud Plyton, a shotgun in her hands, rolled out of hiding as soon as it was quiet.

She ran to the Alcove’s door, and tried the handle. It was locked. Muttering an oath, she knelt down and pulled out her picklock bundle. She worked the lock, sweating, jumping at every sound and every boom of thunder. ‘Come on!’ she spat. ‘Oh, come the frig on!’

The door swung open. Raising her weapon, she crept inside, instantly repelled by the skeletal horrors and jarred monstrosities on display in the gloom around her. A woman in a curious head brace sat chained to a wooden chair at the centre of the room, her head bowed. ‘Kara?’

Kara Swole looked up, drunkenly, at the sound of Plyton’s voice. Her eyes were blinkered by the coloured lenses of the kinebrach device.

‘Who?’ she sighed.

Plyton moved towards her and began to unfasten the chains. ‘It’s all right, Kara. It’s me, Maud. I’ll get you out of this.’

‘Maud? Maud, I saw,’ Kara murmured.

‘It’s all right,’ Plyton assured her, fighting with the shackles.

‘Oh, Throne,’ said Kara more clearly, stiffening in her seat.

‘Kara? It’s all right, just let me—’

‘I saw. I remembered. He’s here. He’s here. He’s here.’

‘Kara? What are you saying to me?’

Kara shuddered, and then projectile vomited violently.

‘Kara!’

Plyton pulled her loose and let the chains fall away with a clatter. She dragged the strange lensed device off Kara’s head.

‘He’s here, Maud. Slyte’s here.’ Kara gurgled. Hauling her upright, Maud Plyton felt the hairs on her neck rise.

‘No, he’s not, Kara. We’re all right. Stop saying that.’

‘He’s *here*.’

ELMINGARD’S VAST STONE kitchen smelled of peppers, goose fat and grease. Their work over for the night, the cooks had gone, and a few scullery boys had been left clearing the marble counters and mopping the floor. Pots were being scrubbed, and the ovens were being banked down. Two youngsters, on menial dishwashing duties, began to lark around beside their enamel sinks, throwing soap suds and bottle brushes at one another.

A senior domestic in a floor-length apron marched in from the larders and bellowed at the pair. He took them both by the ear-lobes and dragged them out of the kitchen, ignoring their squeals of protest. The other scullery boys quietly stopped their chores and crept over to the doorway to eavesdrop and giggle at the dressing down the pot washers were receiving outside.

Belknap seized his chance. He slipped down the length of the old kitchen, hugging the shadows and the wall, his rifle clutched to his chest. Old skills, never forgotten. Hug the cover. Stay low.

His pulse raced. If any of the youngsters turned away from the door, they would see him and raise the alarm, but he couldn't stay hidden. He had to find Kara. There was nothing more important in the entire galaxy.

A small part of him stepped back and scoffed at his antics. Belknap had been taking risks all his adult life: six years in the Guard, nine as a community medic, and then the rest as a back-street, unlicensed doctor. The risks he'd taken had always been about the general good, about service. They had always been measured and rational. This was different. This was stalking into a hornets' nest of first degree sociopaths and heretics, and all for the love of a woman he barely knew, a woman who, in all likelihood, had been dead for over a week.

This was not like him, not at all. He was out of his depth. He was no principal agent like Thonius, Ballack or Kys, or even, Throne rest him, Harlon Nayl. This was not the life he had chosen, nor been recruited for. He was just an ex-soldier who knew his way around a rifle, and had a little training in stealth work and the use of cover.

All he really had was his faith and his passion. He hoped they would be enough.

The scullery boys broke from the doorway and flocked back to their chores as the senior domestic returned, shouting. Belknap had just reached the exit at the far end. He slid into other shadows, breathed out, and headed up a dingy staircase into the rambling house.

Halfway up the stairs, he ducked down as he heard a sound from outside, louder than the din of the storm. What was that?

Thrusters?

'I'D REALLY LIKE to know what's going on.' said Zygmunt Molotch, stepping into the cold, damp under pantry.

He had come out of nowhere. Culzean glanced around, saw him, and quietly cursed. He put on a busy smile and strode towards Molotch. ‘Zyg, Zyg, my friend, you don’t need to bother yourself with this.’ He put a hand gently on Molotch’s arm to steer him out of the room, but Molotch shook it off.

‘I don’t like the idea that you’re hiding things from me, Orfeo. Who is that?’

Molotch pushed past Culzean and advanced into the dank under pantry. Worna and Slade reluctantly stood back from their captive.

Culzean knew he had to handle Molotch with more care than ever before. He shrugged, changing his approach. ‘All right, Zyg, you got me. It’s Ballack. It was supposed to be a surprise.’

‘Ballack?’ Molotch asked. He peered at the man Slade and Worna had been chaining to a stone block by the pantry’s back wall. ‘Ballack? The interrogator?’

‘It was going to be my gift to you,’ Culzean said.

Molotch ignored the facilitator. He knelt down beside Ballack, peering at him.

‘I was quite sure I’d killed you,’ he said.

Behind him, Culzean shot urgent looks at Worna and Slade. Slade put her hand on the grip of her holstered weapon. Worna drew his bolt pistol quietly. Molotch didn’t seem to notice. He stimulated a pressure point in Ballack’s neck with the tip of his finger.

Ballack woke up with a splutter. He swung his head around and blinked as his eyes focused. Blood seeped out between his shattered teeth.

‘M-Molotch...?’

‘Indeed,’ said Molotch. ‘What are you doing here, Ballack? What possible purpose could have brought you to me?’

‘I wanted...’ Ballack murmured, his words slurred and malformed by his broken mouth. ‘I wanted...’

‘What did you want?’ asked Molotch.

‘Revenge, you bastard. I wanted revenge. You left me to die. We were brothers, Cognitae. I served you in fraternal confidence and you betrayed me.’

Molotch rose to his feet and looked down at Ballack. ‘You are a poor excuse for a Cognitae. Diluted fifth or sixth generation, an affront to our tradition. You were an instrument, and I used you without compunction. I owed you nothing.’

Ballack groaned, and thrust at Molotch, but the chains were too tight.

‘You came all this way to kill me?’ Molotch asked. He looked around at Culzean. ‘It rather begs the question how the hell he found me.’

‘Zygmunt, we’ll work that out in due course,’ said Culzean carefully. ‘For now—’

‘No!’ snapped Molotch. ‘I want to know what’s going on, Culzean! Right now!’

Worna moved forwards rapidly. Molotch made a flicking gesture with his right hand, and Worna’s bolt pistol flew out of his grasp. Molotch caught it, turned, and aimed it at Ballack’s head.

‘Molotch! It’s a matter of the most pleasant fraternal confidence!’ Ballack slurred. ‘Molotch!’

‘Shut up,’ said Molotch, and pulled the trigger.

Ballack’s head exploded. Slade leapt back, splattered with blood. Even Worna flinched.

‘Zygmunt...’ Culzean growled.

Molotch muttered some dark prayer and turned back to face them. He calmly handed the weapon back to Worna. ‘What else are you hiding from me, Orfeo?’

‘Nothing,’ Culzean declared.

‘Let me put it another way,’ said Molotch. ‘How did Ballack find me? Why is it I hear thrusters?’

‘I don’t—’ Culzean began.

Slade and Worna pulled out their links simultaneously. Both of them had started chiming.

‘Incoming vehicle,’ said Slade to Culzean.

‘You see?’ said Molotch. ‘I think it’s time you stopped lying to me Orfeo, and started telling me plainly what in the name of the Undying Eight is going on here.’



EIGHT

THE CUTTER SKIMMED in low and fast out of the night towards the high perch of Elmingard. The sensor web of Culzean's fastness had been set, by the master's own recent command, to passive, but even that did not explain the way the cutter had come into airspace proximity without any prior detection.

There were three other factors in play. The first was the way the cutter was being flown: ultra fast and ultra low, what Navy pilots called 'crust kissing'. The flight path had hugged the terrain all the way from the Sarre borders. In places, the craft's downwash had parted treetops like a comb, or whipped up com stooks from the harvested fields. The method of flying kept the craft's profile low and tough to paint. It also required a very experienced and dynamic style of piloting.

The second factor was the way the small craft was obscured. A shield or veil had been employed, its mechanism and type unidentifiable to Tzabo and the other professional experts in Elmingard's security control centre. The cutter was suddenly just there. They heard its thrusters before they saw it on their scopes.

The third factor was the night. The storm was a filthy, howling monster, worse than any they'd known. It straddled the mountaintops like a drunken ogre, roaring at the heavens. The storm's savage electrical pattern flared and sparked and wallowed, creating blinks, false artefacts, phantoms and idiot flashes on the instrumentation. It caused two of the cogitators to short out. Bizarre whines and squeals emerged from the speakers, causing Eldrik, the duty man on station with Tzabo, to tear off his headset.

'This isn't natural,' Eldrik complained.

Tzabo was slow replying. He was staring at his own screen, where the fading after-image of the last lightning ghost had shown an uncanny resemblance to a human skull.

‘What?’ he asked, distractedly.

‘I said this isn’t natural. The storm,’ said Eldrik.

‘No, I don’t think it is,’ said Tzabo. He shook himself. ‘Concentrate on the damn contact. Pull it up for me, sharp.’

‘On it,’ said Eldrik.

Tzabo lifted his handset and pressed the master channel. Culzean answered.

‘Sir,’ said Tzabo, ‘we have an airborne contact two kilometres out, coming in strong. No marker, no registration, no handshake codes.’ ‘I can hear it already,’ replied Culzean’s voice. ‘It must be really moving.’ ‘It is, as I said, sir. I am about to light the house defences and switch to active, with your permission.’

Down in the clammy gloom of the under pantry, the ghastly stink of Ballack’s detonated skull still clinging to the air, Culzean glanced at Molotch and then nodded.

‘Light them up, Mister Tzabo. Activate all perimeter and surface to air systems. Stand ready to deny them and annihilate them.’

‘Hail them first,’ Molotch said.

‘What?’ asked Culzean.

‘Hail them. Hail them,’ Molotch demanded.

‘Zygmunt, they are coming in unauthorised, no codes. They are not ours.’

‘They want to be here.’

‘Zyg, Zyg, Zyg... it could be an Inquisition raid.’

Molotch laughed. It was a disconcerting sound, because he didn’t do it very often. ‘Orfeo, if the Inquisition had found us, they’d have called in Battlefleet Scarus and wiped us off the map already. Hail them.’

‘No, Zygmunt, this—’

Molotch demonstrated his right arm flick again, and the link sailed out of Culzean's manicured hand. Culzean cursed.

Molotch caught the device neatly and raised it to his ear. 'Tzabo, hail the contact.'

There was a long silence.

'Tzabo?'

'I'm sorry, sir. I only take orders from Master Culzean,' Tzabo's voice said.

Molotch sighed and looked back at Culzean. He handed the link back to him. 'I am ever impressed by the quality of the people you employ, Orfeo.'

Culzean took the link back. 'Mister Tzabo, hail the contact.'

'Yes, sir.'

Culzean lowered the link. He glanced at Slade and Worna. 'Ley, I'd like you up in the centre to take charge.'

'Yes, sir,' Slade said, hurrying out.

'Lucius,' Culzean said, 'you'd be useful up on the landing if this goes arse up.'

Worna nodded, and strode away. Culzean looked over at Molotch.

'We should go up and see what this is.'

Molotch nodded. 'We should. Just to be clear, Orfeo, we're not done, you and me.'

'I know.'

'We're not done.'

'I know.'

Molotch placed a hand on Culzean's arm and gently prevented him from leaving the under pantry.

'What I mean, Orfeo, is that there's a very real possibility that we are about to experience a parting of the ways, and you do not, believe me, want that to happen.'

Culzean looked down and very deliberately took hold of Molotch's hand and removed it from his sleeve. 'Zyg, don't threaten me. I am the last

person you should ever threaten.'

Molotch smiled. It was the expression a hyena might wear as it salivated over some newly felled prey.

'Orfeo, there's no one anywhere I would ever be afraid of threatening. Understand that, and our relationship might last a little longer.'

LEYLA SLADE ENTERED Elmingard's security control centre in time to hear Tzabo say, 'Approaching vehicle, approaching vehicle, respond and identify yourself. This is private airspace. Identify yourself, or suffer the consequences of trespass.'

Static fuzzled back.

'Approaching vehicle, approaching vehicle—' Tzabo began again.

Slade took his vox-mic away from him. 'Approaching vehicle,' she said sternly, 'this is Elmingard. Speak now, or we'll hammer you out of the sky with the Emperor's own righteous fury. Respond.'

Static.

'Are the systems active?' Slade asked the duty men.

'Sentries are live. Missiles armed and ranged,' Eldrik replied quickly, clicking brass switches on his desk.

'Approaching vehicle,' Slade began again. She didn't get a further word out. The approaching vehicle interrupted her by answering.

It was not a vox squirt, nor a pict-enabled transmission.

It was a psi-blurt.

+Elmingard. Hold your fire. You do not want to destroy me, because I am not your enemy. Not *this* time.+

HEADING UP THROUGH the Byzantine stairwells of Elmingard, Culzean and Molotch stopped in their tracks.

'Ow!' said Culzean. 'Did you feel that?'

'Yes,' said Molotch. 'It's him.'

'Who?'

‘Who the hell do you think? Who else knows us this well? Who else is so powerful a sender?’

‘Ravenor?’

Molotch nodded. ‘It’s Gideon,’ he said.

‘Ravenor’s alive?’

Molotch looked at him in disdain. ‘Of course he is. Did you ever doubt it? Oh, grow up, Orfeo.’

IT WAS DARK and cold and wet out in the raw base of the astronomer’s broken tower. The wind shrieked in through the gappy stones, and there was no shelter from the rain.

Carl Thonius moaned, pulling at the wrist chain Leyla Slade had shackled him with. The chain was anchored to the heaviest tumbled block in the heart of the tower.

He had heard the voice. In his head, he had heard the voice, despite the buzzing and the chuckling. Gideon’s voice. Gideon was alive.

Thonius felt a sudden, soaring sense of hope. There was regret and shame and pain mixed in with it, but hope was the strongest flavour. He pulled himself upright and looked out into the sheeting rain at the approaching lights. He had strength at last, a force of will. Since that afternoon, in Miserimus, in Formal E of Petropolis, when he’d been stupid enough to look into the flect and let the daemon into his soul in the first place, he hadn’t felt this strong. He could do this. He could beat this. He – He went blind. No, not blind. Deaf. No, not deaf – Falling. He was falling. There was a pit filled with the darkest smoke of Old Night, and the blemish of forgotten suns, decaying into oblivion, and an ochone moaning that crackled like an untuned vox.

It was there in the darkness, swooping around him as he fell into the infinite, his mouth yelling but making no sound. He knew this. He knew what this was. It had happened before.

The thing in the darkness swooped closer, pale and cold, yet burning. It was anguished and spavined, old and so, so dreadful. It snorted like a beast

in Carl's head.

Terrible pressure pushed his eyes back into their sockets. Claws rammed up into his nostrils, and dragged out his tongue until it was tight and stretched. Molten lead poured into his ears, suffocating all sounds. He toppled over, pulling the chain tight, wailing in distress. Black, stinking blood suddenly welled out of his mouth, nostrils and tear ducts. Cramps viced and wrenched at his intestines. His legs exhibited a sudden, palsied tremor. One by one, the rings he had collected snapped and pinged off the swelling fingers of his right hand.

Carl Thonius screamed. He decided he wanted to die after all, really, properly die, and soon.

He let the buzzing out. The pain had become too much. It had been inside him for so long, wearing him down, wearing him out. A lifetime, so it seemed. Buzzing, buzzing, buzzing.

His vision returned. For a bare instant, he saw Slyte, face to face. Thonius's eyeballs burst and jellied matter dribbled down his cheeks.

The rain pelted down on him. It was the last hour of Carl Thonius's human existence. It would be the most miserable and ghastly sixty minutes anyone would ever endure.



NINE

THEY WALK OUT into the storm to greet us. Gunmen, hireling guards, weapons ready. I count twenty of them. I taste the old, high wall behind them, and find it full of automated weaponry. I fear I am too weak for this, too slow. A different me, a younger me, might have done this. Not any more. Not after the door. Words are all I have left.

I hope they will be enough.

Below me, amongst the armed men, I see Culzean and Molotch, coming out through the wall's gate, their hands raised to fend off my cutter's downwash.

It's a bad night. I've seldom seen a storm this wild.

'Set us down, Master Unwerth,' I say. His flying has been superlative.

'With directness,' he replies.

We drop, thrusters gunning. We settle beside the other lander lashed to the rock-lip landing.

'Thank you, Sholto,' I say as I move towards the hatch.

The hatch folds open. Rain sprays in. It's a really bad night. I hover down outside onto the landing and face Culzean and his waiting troops. Molotch himself hangs back, peering at me. This is a strange moment.

+Hello, Zygmunt.+

'Gideon.'

+There's no time to fight each other, Zygmunt. That goes for you too, Culzean. Slyte is here.+

'Here?' Molotch echoes me. 'How could he be here?'

'That's enough of that.' Culzean cries out, walking forwards to take control of the standoff. There's a small, robed woman beside him. She's a

blunter; not a good one, but the best Culzean could afford, and she's good enough to keep my mind back.

'Gideon!' Culzean cries, as if welcoming an old friend. He approaches across the rain-swept rock, arms wide, accompanied by his gunmen and his blunter. 'Gideon! So wonderful to see you! I thought I'd killed you!'

'You came close,' my voxsponder crackles back. 'Very close.'

'No harm done, then,' he laughs. 'What brings you here?'

'As I said quite plainly, Slyte,' I reply. I see Molotch take a step forwards. In all our encounters up to this point, I've never seen him scared. He's scared now.

'Slyte?' chuckles Culzean. 'Gideon, he's not here.'

'Oh, he most surely is,' I answer. 'I can taste him. Turn off your blunter and feel the truth.'

'Turn off my blunter? Seriously, Gideon, you're an alpha-plus psyker. What makes you think I'd do something as suicidal as that?'

'Self preservation.' I reply. 'My interrogator, Carl Thonius, is hosting Slyte. If he's not here already, he will be soon. You're going to die, Culzean, all of you. The warp is not selective in its predations.'

'Thonius?' asks Molotch, pushing forward through the gang of gunmen. 'Your man, Thonius?'

'Yes, Zygmunt. Carl Thonius. I don't know how or why, but he was the one infected.'

Molotch approaches my chair. He crouches down in the fierce rain and embraces it. It is a strange gesture for a mortal enemy to make, but it is earnest. He is friendless and he is scared. 'Gideon,' he whispers, 'Culzean can't be trusted.'

+Oh, and *you* can be trusted, can you, Zygmunt?+

He leans back and gazes dully at the hull of my chair. 'Of course I can't, Gideon, but this is a different scale of trust. I understand what Slyte means, Culzean doesn't. We need to... we need to be of one mind and one purpose now.'

+I agree.+

‘Oh, good, good.’

‘Orfeo,’ I venture, ‘can we reach some compact here? Against a mutually destructive foe?’

Culzean shrugs. A woman with a hard face and close-cropped hair walks out onto the landing behind him and hands him a control wand.

‘You sent for this, sir?’ she says.

‘Thank you, Ley.’

‘Last chance, Culzean,’ I say. ‘I’m agreeing with the proposal you made to me.’

‘It’s too late,’ he says. ‘As of about half an hour ago, I got everything I ever wanted.’

He clicks the wand and a void shield suddenly covers him, opaque and fizzling in the rain.

‘Kill them,’ he says. ‘Kill them all. Molotch too.’

The sentry guns clatter. The gunmen raise their weapons.

They open fire.

Culzean, shielded, walks calmly back into the rambling hulk of Elmingard.



TEN

THE BROADSIDE OF automatic fire hammered down on the landing area. The gunfire was deafening, and the strobe of muzzle flashes blinding. Ravenor's cutter took several punishing hits.

'Get away! Get away, Sholto!' Ravenor yelled.

The cutter took off and dropped away out of sight over the lip of the cliff, wounded and pluming smoke. As the firestorm began, Ravenor had desperately raised a force wall with the last of his strength. The hard rounds and las fire laid down by Culzean's men and the wall defences spanged off it. Ravenor projected the psi barrier wide enough to shield Molotch as well as himself. It seemed odd to be expending precious effort trying to protect a man he had spent a large part of his life trying to kill.

Shells and las-bolts continued to punch against Ravenor's shield, rippling and dimpling the air in brief crater patterns.

'You can't hold this back forever!' Molotch yelled.

'If there's any luck left in this accursed galaxy,' Ravenor replied, 'I won't have to.'

+Now would be a good time!+ he sent with as much willpower as he could spare.

ON THE OTHER side of the monastic wall, more hired guns were massing at Slade's orders to protect the landing. They came running from several directions, arming weapons and running link checks. The gunfire beyond the wall was a rattling, coughing blurt of sound.

'Fan out!' ordered Eldrik, in charge of the support unit. 'Some of you get on the wall top. Heavy weapons to the gate!'

Eldrik paused suddenly. Some of his men ran on past him. ‘Where the hell did that come from?’ he asked.

There was a door in the lower terrace wall. It was made of wood, a very ordinary old door in a very ordinary frame. It looked as if it had always been there, but Eldrik was quite certain he’d never seen it before.

The door opened. A small girl, barely a teenager, stepped out into the rain and looked around with innocent fascination. She held an ornate key in her hand.

‘Hello!’ she said to Eldrik with a bright smile.

‘Who the hell are you?’ asked Eldrik.

‘She’s with me,’ said Angharad Esw Sweydyr.

The towering Carthaen swordswoman came out of the open doorway with such virile speed, Eldrik didn’t have time to raise his weapon. His eyes went wide at the sight of her, a goddess in armour.

Evisorex cut him in half.

‘Get back, child,’ Angharad hissed, and Iosob scooted into the shadows by the door. Angharad became a blur in the rain and lightning, her cloak and her braided hair flying, her sabre flashing. She ripped into the squad Eldrik had been assembling. In the confusion, few of them were able to tell exactly what was happening, although it was patently obvious that they were being slaughtered. A few got off hasty shots. Screams echoed, and lopped limbs spun into the air. Arterial blood squirted up into the torrential rain.

Nayl and Kys followed Angharad out of the door. He wore an armoured bodyglove and carried a Voss-pattern automatic grenade launcher, heavy and pugnacious, with a fat drum magazine. Patience was wearing a dark green bodyglove with long black boots, and a billowing overskirt. The pleats of the skirt contained dozens of concealed kineblades. Four needle blades already circled around her.

They moved fast, following Angharad’s trail of destruction. The flagstones were slick with rain and swilling blood. The steam of entrails and opened bodies fumed in the cold air. Nayl fired two rounds from the

launcher, lobbing them down the length of the approach. He was rewarded by a meaty fireball that hurled rock chips in all directions. He sent another round over into the gate itself, throwing two of Culzean's gunmen headlong with the blast, and then ran forwards, firing single grenades up at the backs of the sentry pods built into the old wall.

The grenades were magnetic. Each one thumped onto a pod's metal cowling and stuck fast. A sentry gun exploded, blown out of the wall top in a fire shock and a rain of bricks. A second blew out, and then a third. Each pod had been firing on full auto until the moment it was obliterated. Nayl took out a fourth pod, and paused to reload the drum mag. His handiwork had torn holes along the monastic wall, like a gum with the teeth extracted. There was a sharp tang of fycelene in the air. Kys brought down a gunman on the wall steps with her kineblades, and then reached out with her telekinesis into the mouldering bricks and stones of the wall itself. She found the hot, heavy power cables and datawire bundles that fed the rest of the wall's automatic defences. Gritting her teeth, she pulled.

A long, fat snake of armoured tranking tore out of the wall in a shower of plaster and masonry. It came clean out like the spine of a cooked fish and then snapped in two places, sheeting electrical sparks and voltage flashes across the wet stone.

The remaining wall defences went dead.

+Gideon?+

+That's better, thank you.+

Outside, on the gale-swept landing, Ravenor began to move forwards, Molotch close behind him. The ground in front of them had been chewed to smoking pulp by the bombardment that had, until a moment before, been hammering them relentlessly. Ravenor was able to slacken his shield at last, and did so with relief. The only shots coming their way were from the blue-suited gunmen Culzean had left on the landing. Ravenor popped his chair's cannon-pods from their recesses and cut down two of them. The others began to flee back through the gate into Elmingard, firing as they went.

Kys, Nayl and Angharad were waiting for them. By the time Ravenor and Molotch came through the gate, the only gunmen still alive were the ones who had been wise enough to flee up into the banked terraces of the cliff top fastness.

+Start moving. Start searching.+

‘Are you sure he’s here?’ asked Nayl.

+I’m sure. He’s hard to read, hard to pinpoint, because he’s not really Carl any more, but he’s here. I can hear him screaming.+

‘What do we do if we find him?’ asked Kys.

+Call for me.+

The three of them ran off up the steps onto the terraces. In under a minute, Ravenor and Molotch could hear more shooting, and the ominous crump of Nayl’s launcher.

‘Iosob, stay here, by the door.’ Ravenor told the girl. She nodded.

+Let’s follow the others,+ Ravenor sent to Molotch.

‘Do you have a plan?’ asked Molotch.

+No. This is entirely improvised. I am just hoping we can find Thonius before it’s too late.+

‘What weren’t you telling your people?’ Molotch asked.

+I don’t know what you mean, Zygmunt.+

‘Come on, Gideon, don’t try to trick a trickster. What were you keeping from them?’

They moved up a mouldering flight of steps and onto one of the lower terraces. The dark, interlocking bulk of Elmingard rose above them in the storm.

+That it’s already too late. This place is radiating a psychic force that’s off the scale. I daren’t probe it in any detail, because it would burn out my mind. There is no question that Slyte is here.+

‘So I return to my original question. Is there a plan?’

+I was hoping you might have some suggestions. Daemonology is one of your specialties, Zygmunt. I was also hoping that Culzean might have

tools or resources to help us.+

‘Culzean’s playing his own game,’ Molotch replied, dismissively, ‘but his house is full of arcane trinkets and talismans. It’s possible there might be something that could aid us. However, I’ve been studying Culzean’s collection for weeks, and I haven’t found anything so far that would do. Believe me, I’ve searched diligently.’ He paused, thoughtfully. ‘As for my own talents... I don’t know. I have dabbled. I have studied. I have bound certain lesser fiends, and created a daemonhost or two over the years. I understand the basic principles of gate and portal rituals, but Slyte is a *Daemonicus Arcana Majoris*. I would never try to summon him, because even with the correct rites and wards, he would be too powerful to bind. As it is, he’s already here. It’s long past the time for prophylactic rituals.’

Thunder splintered the sky.

‘The only control a man can ever have over a daemon is by way of transaction,’ Molotch said. A man provides the daemon with a way into our dimension, and in exchange, the daemon is bound by the terms of that favour. It is a very complex, hazardous thing to do, and takes years of precise preparation to pull off. If a daemon is already here, in our universe, there is no transaction left to hold it to. No terms, Gideon. There’s no way of asserting power or command over it, because it owes us nothing and wants nothing from us. It is simply a material fact, ungoverned by mortal powers.

+What about banishment?+

Molotch laughed. ‘Like binding, it’s a complex process. It takes months or years of preparatory study. It also requires the correct time and place.’

+And this isn’t the correct time or place?+

‘Does it look like it to you?’

+I’m not going to give up. We have to try, while we still have life in our bodies. We have to try something. You know the layout of this place, Molotch. Take me to Culzean’s trinkets and help me search for that something.+

CULZEAN'S HIRED GUNS offered resistance to the bitter end. Nayl came up some crumbling stone steps onto a paved terrace several levels above Ravenor and Molotch, and immediately came under renewed fire. Las shots shrieked at him from a large doorway across the terrace, forcing him into cover behind a stone urn that quickly became a shapeless lump.

He, Kys and Angharad had been obliged to fight every step of the way up into Elmingard, and he was down to his last few grenades. He switched to his heavy autopistol, keeping the launcher in reserve.

There was no backup to call for. Kys had split to the left a few minutes earlier, heading into what looked like the domestic quarters. They'd both lost touch with Angharad before that. In her warrior fury, she'd simply stormed ahead, expecting them to keep up. From the screams emanating from a nearby wing of the place, she'd found suitable work to occupy herself.

The rain was getting worse. Nayl had seen lightning strike the roofline of Elmingard at least twice in the last five minutes. A black cloud, blacker than the night itself, whirled like a halo around the upper ramparts of the building. He didn't like to dwell on what might be causing that. Nayl also didn't want to notice the sweet, rancid smell that he kept catching on the wind. Putrefaction, the cloying scent of the warp.

The gunmen at the doorway had him pinned. With a grunt of resignation, Nayl hoisted up his launcher and banged a grenade into the air. It landed in the doorway and detonated in a sheet of fire and grit.

He was up and running at once. Two gunmen lay dead, mangled by the blast. Another staggered, deafened, in the ruin of the doorway. Part of the building facade had collapsed and smoke poured out of the broken door.

Letting his slung launcher bang against his hip as he ran, Nayl drew his autopistol and capped the staggering man as he went in past him. The hall inside was thick with smoke. Another survivor was crawling around on the debris-strewn floor on his hands and knees. Nayl put the wretch out of his misery, and then headed on. The smoke began to clear. He found himself in the door arch of a large room with a high roof. Lightning backlit the large,

leaded windows. The room was a dining hall of sorts. It was dominated by a huge refectory table of old, sturdy timber, big enough to seat thirty. There were the chairs to prove it.

Nayl took a step forwards, and two heavy rounds exploded against the wall beside him, blitzing out plaster and stone chips. Nayl hurled himself forwards and rolled across the floor, using the end of the hefty table as cover. Another heavy shot whooshed past. He knew the distinctive sound: a bolt pistol.

From the other end of the chamber, Lucius Worna came out to play. The flashes of lightning outside glinted off his pearly armour. He fired his bolt pistol as he advanced, blasting splintered holes in the table.

‘That you, Nayl? Is that you?’ he roared.

‘Oh, probably,’ Nayl replied, crouching under the table end and looking around desperately for an option.

Worna snorted. ‘I’m gonna mess you up, Harlon. Don’t frig with me. Be a man, and come out and take it.’

‘I’m going to say no,’ Nayl answered. Another bolt round tore clean through the table top and fractured the floor tiles beside him.

Worna grabbed hold of the long table with his left hand. The fingers of his metal gauntlet sank into the wood. With a whine of power armour, he hurled the huge table right over. It left the ground and crashed down on its side, shattering some of the chairs.

Nayl was left, crouching, on the open tiles, his cover removed.

He looked up at Worna, five metres away.

‘Nayl,’ Worna growled, a smile crossing his face. ‘You know what this is?’

‘Yeah. End of story,’ said Nayl. He fired the grenade launcher he was clutching against his chest.

The grenade round hit Worna in the sternum, with enough kinetic force to knock him back several steps.

Recovering his balance, the grizzled bounty hunter looked down. The round had magnetically attached itself to his breastplate. Worna scrabbled at it to knock it off.

It exploded.

The blast sent Nayl sprawling along the floor. It threw Worna's mighty, spread-eagled form violently across the chamber in the other direction, demolishing the far doors as he ploughed into them.

Nayl picked himself up and hobbled down the room to the wreckage of the doors. Smoke threaded the air. He could see Worna's corpse on its back, half buried in broken hardwood door panels. The armour of his upper torso was buckled and blackened, and his face was a raw, red mask of burnt flesh.

Nayl peered down at his old partner in crime for a moment. He'd always wondered how this story would end.

The corpse grabbed him by the right ankle. With a whipcrack snap, it jerked Nayl down onto his back. Winded, Nayl tried to struggle, but Worna was already rising, black eyes burning savagely out of the blast-flayed remains of his face. Blood wept from the seared flesh.

Worna picked Nayl up by the throat, and lifted him off the floor. With his left hand, he tore the grenade launcher off Nayl's body and chucked it aside. Then he threw Nayl back into the dining room.

Nayl landed hard, dazed. Worna came to him and picked him up again, with both hands this time. He raised him high, and threw him a second time. Nayl's flailing body hit one of the dining room's grand windows and smashed through it in a blizzard of glass and broken leading. Nayl fell six metres and landed on the grey slates of an annex roof below. His impact shattered some of the slates and made a dent. He lay on the damaged roof in the torrential rain, twisted and unconscious.

Lightning flared. A fork of it struck the ridge of a nearby roof, exploding the heavy tiles and exposing black rafters that began to burn.

Worna turned away from the shattered window, breathing in long, sucking rasps. He walked slowly across the dining room, found his bolt pistol, and

picked it up. He returned to the window. Small fragments of glass were still falling out of the remaining twists of leading, tinkling as they hit the ground. Rain blew in, stinging Worna's ruined face.

He slammed a new clip into his bolt pistol, racked it, and leaned out of the window to take aim at Harlon Nayl's helpless form.



ELEVEN

‘I HOPE YOU know what the hell you’re doing,’ Leyla Slade said to Culzean as they advanced briskly up through the northern layers of Elmingard.

‘I always know what I’m doing,’ he replied jauntily. ‘Now, you put him where I told you to put him, didn’t you?’

‘In the old tower, yes.’ Slade looked at Culzean. ‘Believe me, if I’d known what he was when I was doing it, I wouldn’t have gone near him.’

A squad of six hired guns were escorting them. At her words, they exchanged troubled looks.

‘Everything’s all right,’ Culzean said. ‘Everything’s all right, gentlemen. Believe me, you’ll all be receiving triple pay for tonight’s work.’

‘We’re getting reports, sir,’ said Tzabo, leading the fire team. ‘The inquisitor’s forces have taken the gate and are inside Elmingard. We’ve lost men. A lot of men.’

‘Our distinguished foe won’t trouble us much longer,’ Culzean said confidently. ‘Now come along.’ They ran across a courtyard, braving the relentless rain, and entered another wing of the sprawling building.

‘Thonius is really Slyte?’ Slade asked Culzean as they strode along. She kept her voice low.

‘This is what I have learned from the Swole woman, and she was in no position to lie. It’s sweet, I think she’d actually been trying to protect him.’

‘Orfeo, Slyte is—’

‘Slyte is perfect. Slyte is the thing I’ve spent my life working towards and look, Leyla, he comes to me in the end almost by chance. Ah, the irony!’

‘I don’t understand what you think you can achieve. Molotch—’

‘Zygmunt was a fine enough distraction, but there was no real future in that relationship. I believed for a long time he would be an invaluable asset to my work, but I hadn’t taken into account his character. So difficult. So hard to govern.’

‘So smart,’ said Slade darkly.

‘Yes, that too. You must have noticed, these last few weeks, how we were falling out? It was just a matter of time before it turned nasty.’

Slade shuddered. ‘I think it’s turned nasty already,’ she remarked.

‘Oh, poo, Ley. You know what I mean. He was so paranoid.’

‘Was he?’ she asked. ‘Or was he the only one who really knew what kind of disaster Slyte represented?’

Culzean stopped and turned to face Slade. The men came to a halt behind them.

‘Ley, listen to me. Have I ever let you down? Have I? You’ve seen some of the shining weapons I have at my disposal. They’ve taken me years to collect and years to learn how to use. Molotch, for all his smart mind, is just a dabbler. I am a professional in these things. Experienced, informed, detached. Slyte is just another asset for me to exploit. Another shining weapon... albeit the brightest and shiniest I’ve ever acquired.’

‘You think... you think you can control a daemon of the Major Arcana?’

Culzean laughed. ‘Oh, I know I can. Control him and bind him. Subjugate him. I sent our savants up to the tower just before Ravenor made his grand entrance. As we speak, they are completing the necessary rituals and enslaving Slyte’s power to my command.’

Slade hesitated before responding. ‘Sir, I advise caution,’ she said, taking out her handgun and fitting it with one of the specially prepared clips. ‘I have always admired your ambition—’

‘Thank you, Ley.’

‘May I ask... what you intend to do?’

‘That’s just it.’ said Orfeo Culzean with a winning smile. ‘I can do anything I want. Anything at all. With Molotch as an ally, I might have taken down a government or seized control of a world. But with Slyte... oh, Leyla. The whole Imperium is mine. Start dreaming. I’ll soon be able to grant you any heart’s desire.’

‘Right now,’ she replied, ‘I’d settle for being somewhere else. What about Ravenor and his people?’

‘Slyte will destroy them, at my order. I’d like you to contact the Divine Fraternity later tonight. I’ve kept a line of communication open with Frater Stefoy. They will want to know of Slyte’s birth. They may wish to come and worship him. Encourage them. The Fraternity, with their long-standing knowledge of Slyte, will be useful to have around, an added guarantee. Now, can we proceed?’

They left the northern wing and stepped out into the storm. Tzabo’s men lit lamp packs. Rain swirled into their faces as they struggled up the track to the astronomer’s tower. Incandescent lightning boomed like atomic blasts overhead in the murk.

The ragged tower formed an ominous black shape through the sheeting rain. They soldiered on, their clothes drenched, arms raised to protect their faces. Culzean reignited his void shield for cover against the elemental fury, and the rain sizzled and steamed off its field.

Then the rain stopped, and there was utter calm.

They stopped outside the tower’s base, steam rising off their soaked clothing. There was shocking peace and silence.

‘Eye of the storm?’ Culzean suggested, with a nervous laugh.

Slade looked back down the track. Ten yards away, the rain was falling. It was falling like a monsoon deluge all across the black silhouette of Elmingard. Lightning jagged the sky. They could hear none of it.

‘This is, this is...’ one of Tzabo’s men said, raising his weapon.

‘Oh, Throne,’ said Tzabo, looking up. The sky directly above the tower was bare of clouds. The black weight of the thunderhead hung over the mountains, but had swirled and parted to form a deep chimney of clear air

over the astronomer's broken edifice. Alien stars glittered high above. They were moving, circling like fireflies, forming and re-forming constellations and the spirals of unknown galaxies.

'Let's go back,' said Slade, her voice hollow in the still air. 'Orfeo, please.'

'It's just the binding,' Culzean told her. 'Our savants have done their work. This area is becalmed because of the rites they have performed. Slyte is bound.'

'What's that stink?' asked Tzabo. A noxious odour oozed out of the black tower, a charnel air.

Slade moved forwards, her weapon aimed. Culzean followed her. They stepped through the doorway into the base of the tower. Rainwater dripped down from the upper levels. Scraps of torn parchment, sodden and limp, littered the floor.

Slade saw the stone block she'd shackled Thonius to an hour before. The remnants of the chain trailed from it, broken and bent.

'Orfeo?'

'What?'

'Orfeo, look.'

The walls around them were decorated with something dark and sticky. It took them a moment to comprehend what they were looking at. Culzean's savants were dead. Their pulverised meat and bones were smeared in a thin, clotting layer onto stone all around the tower. Blood ran down and congealed at the base of the walls.

'Leyla?' Culzean whispered.

She grabbed his hand and dragged him back out of the tower. Tzabo and his men were waiting there.

'We're leaving,' she told them.

'Sir?'

'She's right,' mumbled Culzean, trying to think straight. 'She's right, Tzabo. We're leaving.'

So soon?

They turned.

Something that had once been Carl Thonius stood in the doorway of the tower. He was naked, his clothes burnt off him. A ghastly red light radiated from the core of his being, illuminating him from within. His skin had become transparent and his skeletal structure was revealed like a medicae's scan. His right arm was fleshless from the middle of the upper half. What remained was a scorched bone limb that ended in vast, black talons.

Culzean, he said. When his mouth opened, they could see flames dancing inside.

'Slyte?' stammered Orfeo Culzean. 'Slyte, I command you—'

'Don't be such an idiot!' Slade cried.

The thing's mouth opened. It kept opening. It stretched and distended like a snake's jaw, far wider than any human mouth could ever open. Then it exhaled with a dull, buzzing roar. A wave of wretched vapour streamed out of its maw and engulfed them. Tzabo's men recoiled, gasping and vomiting. All of the silver buttons on their smart blue outfits tarnished and went black. Two of them fell down, overcome with nausea.

Gagging, Slade raised her weapon. 'Run!' she gasped. 'Run, Orfeo!'

She started to fire. Tzabo and his remaining men added their firepower to hers. Their las shots bounced off the daemonic figure, but Slade's special loads had been aimed low, into the soil at its feet. They burst on impact, releasing their contents from their bondage in the specially engraved shells.

Gibbering warp-forms bloomed like unholy flowers, sprouting from the earth. Hooktors and clawbrils and other hideous sub-daemons that Culzean had painstakingly captured and imprisoned over the years manifested as they were released, and struck at Slyte in mindless wrath.

Cackling, Slyte dismembered them, shredding their bodies like wet sacks, spraying ichor and pus in all directions. His black talons ripped through their writhing masses and reduced them to dissolving ectoplasmic sludge.

Slyte stepped forwards through the last of the warp-things. He made a barking sound, like a dog-fox, and the ground split. Insectile vermin, glittering black, some the size of lobsters or small felines, poured out of the ground in a frenetic, clicking flood.

‘Run!’ Slade screamed.

Culzean started to run. The insects enveloped him, burning and falling away as the void shield threw them back.

Tzabo and his men were engulfed. The seething mass of chittering bodies covered them from head to toe, and stripped them of clothing and meat. Bare skeletons, crawling with black things, collapsed onto the ground and disarticulated. Tzabo was the last to fall. He turned his gun on himself and blew off his own head.

The air was full of flies, buzzing and swarming.

Culzean ran. Slade ran after him, wailing. There were things on her, on her arms and her legs, biting and scurrying.

‘Orfeo!’

‘Leyla! Protect me!’

She turned, loyal to the end, clapped a fresh clip into her weapon, and faced the burning daemon striding after them. She started to fire.

Culzean ran on regardless. He heard Leyla Slade shrieking, and shuddered when that shrieking cut off abruptly.

He kept running.

IN THE HEART of Elmingard, Siskind and the others heard awful roaring and baying coming from outside. A dire stink suddenly permeated the place.

‘That’s it,’ Siskind told Ornales. ‘We’re leaving.’

The rest of Culzean’s staff and employees were already fleeing. Tables and chairs were overturned in their efforts to exit. There was screaming and shouting. The noises echoed down the hallways.

‘Is the flier locked?’ Siskind asked his first mate as they hurried along.

‘It’ll only open to our voice prints,’ Ornales assured him. ‘What in hell is happening?’

Siskind drew his laspistol. ‘I have no idea and no wish to know,’ he said. A man slammed into them. The silver buttons of his blue wool clothing had turned black. Siskind saw how every metal surface in the place was tarnished and soiled. The air had gone bad. The stink was everywhere.

‘Take me with you! Take me with you, shipmaster!’ the man pleaded. Siskind shot him.

‘This is madness!’ he growled.

Ornales said nothing, but drew his own weapon.

They reached a stairwell that led down into the southern terraces. Scullery boys and domestics ran past them, trying to find a place of refuge. Siskind and Ornales started down the steps.

Plyton appeared on the staircase below them, hauling Kara Swole. She cried out as she saw Siskind.

Siskind started shooting. Plyton dropped Kara and fired her shotgun. The blast took Ornales in the chest and hurled him back up the stairs. He landed, limp, and rolled back down a step or two.

Siskind kept firing. He hit Plyton in the right hip and the left shoulder, and spun her back down the staircase. She screeched in pain as she bounced off the wall and fell on her face. Leaping down two steps at a time, Siskind came to a halt over Kara’s body.

She looked up at him, blankly.

‘Kara!’ Plyton yelled in pain, doubled up and writhing at the base of the stairs. Siskind pointed his hand weapon at Kara Swole.

The first las-shot blew out his spine. The second chopped the back off his head as cleanly as an axe blow. Siskind staggered, gaping, smoke streaming out of his mouth. Blood poured down the back of his expensive coat of Vitrian glass.

He toppled over the stair rail and fell.

Belknap clattered down the staircase to reach Kara, slinging his lasrifle onto his shoulder. He grabbed her, and covered her face with kisses.

‘I thought I’d lost you,’ he whispered.

‘Pat, Patrik...’ she moaned. ‘Help Maud.’

He looked over her head at Plyton thrashing in anguish on the deck below.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Of course.’

LEANING OUT OF the broken window, Lucius Worna fired his bolt pistol at Nayl on the cratered roof below. Nothing happened.

He glanced at his weapon. It was a trusty tool and had never malfunctioned before. He tried again. He realised that something was preventing his finger from squeezing the trigger.

He turned instinctively. A kineblade impaled him through one eye like an arrow. Two more struck into his chest.

Patience Kys walked towards him across the ruined dining hall, her skirt flowing.

‘There’s more where that came from,’ she promised.

Worna tried to fire at her. She lashed out with the full fury of her telekinesis and grabbed him around the neck, throttling him.

Worna choked.

Kys raised her arms like a sorcerer casting a spell and propelled him up off the floor and out through the window. Advancing, she lifted his struggling bulk up into the sky and suspended him there.

A bolt of lightning slammed into his metal-clad form. A second later, two more monumental lightning strikes hit him.

‘End of story?’ she asked sarcastically, her hands raised.

‘You... wish...’ Worna gasped, blood streaming out of his mouth.

Kys determinedly held the bounty hunter in the sky a little longer. Eight more forks of lightning slammed into Worna in rapid succession. His armoured carcass began to burn.

Once it was blazing like a torch, she hurled it away. It arced across the rooftops of Elmingard like a comet, leaving a trail of fire behind it.

Kys leaned out of the window. ‘Harlon?’ she yelled. ‘You alive down there? Harlon?’



TWELVE

THEY HURRIED ACROSS the rose terrace into the solar. Ravenor led the way.

‘Of course, I knew it was Thonius all along,’ Molotch said.

+What?+

‘Oh, not at the time, but now... it all makes sense.’

+How?+

‘At Petropolis, Gideon. In the Sacristy. I came so close to my dreams.’

+I know you did.+

‘Gideon, you’d have enjoyed them too, admired them. Enuncia was so perfect, so clean.’

+Zygmunt...+

Molotch shrugged. ‘At the point of creation, I was interrupted by your people. Kara Swole and Carl Thonius. Of course, I dealt with them quickly. Then Slyte appeared.’

+Slyte was there?+

‘Yes, Gideon. Did you not realise what actually thwarted my efforts on Eustis Majoris? Slyte stopped me. Slyte hurt me. But for Slyte, I would have triumphed.’

+Holy Throne.+

‘The daemon just appeared, and I was too scared to think. Culzean and his woman helped me escape. But now it’s so obvious. Slyte was there because Thonius was there. Thonius was Slyte. He destroyed my plans for Enuncia.’

Ravenor’s chair coasted to a halt in the middle of the solar. Rain spattered in through the open doors behind them.+I thought it was me, Zygmunt. I

thought I was the one who'd beaten you. Slyte takes the credit for that, does he?+

'Rather, I think, Carl Thonius,' Molotch replied. 'Now let's get on with this.' He started to rummage through the crates Culzean had left stacked in the chamber. 'Come along, Gideon.'

Molotch paused in his search and looked back at the support chair.

'What's the matter?'

+Nothing.+

'You never told me how you found out,' said Molotch.

+A nascent psyker called Zael. He knew it all. I have a feeling he left it too late to tell me.+

'What's the matter?'

+You keep asking me that, Zygmunt.+

'I'll keep asking until you tell me.'

+Very well. Things have changed. I can feel it. The storm's shifting. The magnitude of power has increased. The daemon is on the move, coming closer. I can feel him closing in. He's entered the house. We've only got a few minutes left. Can't you smell him?+

'Then this is all a waste of time,' said Molotch.

The end door of the solar burst open and Culzean scrambled in, his void shield still flickering around him. It was close to failure. He began to ransack the drawers at the far end of the room. His shield blinked out.

Culzean turned, suddenly aware he was not alone. He snatched out an auto-snub and aimed it at Molotch and Ravenor.

'Don't be so silly,' Ravenor said.

'He's coming! He's coming!' Culzean cried. 'He's right behind me! He killed my poor Leyla!'

Molotch flicked his right arm. Culzean's pistol flew out of his hand and tumbled in the air. Molotch caught it, and shot Culzean through the belly. Culzean crashed back into the chest of drawers, and fell down clutching

his abdomen. His face went white. There was a look of speechless surprise on his face.

+Was that really necessary?+

‘You have no idea,’ said Molotch.

Culzean was bleeding out. His agony was tangible, and pressed down on Ravenor’s mind like a dead weight. Ravenor was quite sure Molotch had gone for a belly wound because he knew it was an excruciating, lingering way to die.+Culzean, is there anything we can do?+

Culzean groaned and coughed up blood. ‘Help me. A doctor...’

+I meant about the daemon.+

The door behind him flew open. Angharad landed like a cat in front of Molotch and sliced the end off his pistol. She was about to gut him. Ravenor threw her back against the wall with psychic force.

+No, Angharad. Leave him.+

‘He is the devil!’ she sneered.

+There are worse devils abroad tonight.+

Angharad glared at Molotch.

+We will need him if we want to survive.+

Molotch bent over Culzean. ‘Orfeo? Orfeo, listen. What were you looking for when you came in here?’

‘Something. Anything.’ Culzean swallowed hard. ‘I wondered if there was something I’d forgotten, something I’d overlooked.’

‘Is there? What have you got left? Any shining weapons? Any talismans or incantations that might be efficacious?’

Culzean shook his head. ‘Nothing, nothing. I have a few rites of banishment, but I’m certain none would be suitable.’

‘Because this isn’t the right time or place?’ Ravenor asked. ‘Show us anyway.’

Culzean gestured weakly at a nearby book case. ‘Third shelf, in the green box.’

Molotch rose, slid the box off the shelf, and opened it. He pulled out a thick sheaf of old parchments bound with a cord.

‘Banishment rites,’ Culzean murmured, pain etched across his face, ‘all very old, and from a number of sources. The *Hech’ell Deportation* is the most complete and the most reliable. I’ve used it before. It works.’

+But?+

‘It won’t work here. None of them will.’

Molotch was speed-reading the crumbling parchments. ‘He’s right. It’s like I told you. To cast out a daemon, one must choose the right place and time. One must find a location where the walls between dimensions are tissue-thin, a rift or fissure, a place of weakness. There are only a few such places in the entire cosmos and Elmingard isn’t one of them. Any banishment rites we try here are a waste of effort.’

He was about to say something else but his voice cut off. Something flickered and blinked in the corner of the solar. It manifested, just a hazy shimmer, like smoke in sunlight.

It was Carl Thonius.



THIRTEEN

THONIUS FLICKERED IN and out of reality. He seemed to be moving too fast, like a speeded up pict sequence.

I told you told you told you

Ravenor, Molotch and Angharad backed slowly towards the terrace doors. The room's lights dimmed and flashed in time to the lightning. Sprawled near to the manifested spectre, Culzean whimpered and tried to drag himself away.

'Slyte...' whispered Molotch.

+No. Slyte's still out there, coming closer. This is an aberration. A random psychic effect, just an echo.+

Gideon Gideon Gid Gideon

+Carl?+

Help me help me help meee

+Throne! Carl?+

The spectre sat down on one of the solar's armchairs. Its form continued to jump and flicker as if it was running at the wrong speed, and repeated and overlapped.

Gideon, please. It it hurts hurts. It hurts. Help me.

+Carl, it's too late.+

Oh, it hurts. I can I can beat this, I can.

+No, Carl, you can't.+

Gideon, I can. If you you you help me. You owe me me owe me owe me. I've been working with you with you all the way. I stopped Molotch at Petropolis. I did that. Did that. Did that. Me, Gideon. I made Kara made

Kara Kara well again. I saved you from the creatures behind the door. Behind the door.

+Carl, I realise what you've done. I realise what you've tried to accomplish, but it's too late. You cannot be saved. The daemon has consumed you.+

The spectre blinked and fluttered in front of them. Blow flies began to collect on the insides of the window panes.

Don't say say that, Gideon. Help me beat this. Help me me. When Slyte took me, I thought I thought it was the end the end. But then I realised. I could control it. I could I could I could control it. I could master it. Give give me that chance. Imagine imagine what we could do then, you and me. For the ordos. For the Imperium. For the Imperium. For the Imperium. I could show you how the warp works. The warp warp the warp.

'He's just a phantom! A lie!' Culzean screeched.

I'm not not not.

'We're witnessing the last remains of Carl's being, driven by his will.' said Ravenor. 'We are witnessing an act of formidable determination.'

Gideon.

Ravenor hovered forwards and approached the jumping, bleached out image.

+Carl? If I could help you, I would. Courage such as yours should not go unrewarded, but I cannot help you. You are gone. You were gone the moment Slyte flowed into you. The idea that you can master an entity like Slyte is the sort of misguided radicalism you and I used to scoff at. Your logic has been altered by the corruption inside you. Slyte is feeding you excuses and false hopes to wear you down. What you're talking about cannot be countenanced by the Inquisition. It cannot be countenanced by any rational person. It cannot be countenanced by me.+

Nooo! no no

+Carl. I'm sorry.+

Noooooooooo!

THE SPECTRE LOSES form and control. It quivers, shaking as if caught in a violent earth tremor. I feel the scalding fury of the psi-force inside it. The windows of the solar rattle and panes crack. The swirls of blow flies cascade into the air like soot. The buzzing is everywhere. Culzean screams in undignified terror as books and other totemic objects clatter off the shelves, and pieces of parchment take flight like paper streamers in a parade.

They remind me of the Great Triumph on Thracian Primaris where I was mutilated. I am back there, for a moment, walking in the procession, paper streamers and petals showering down around me. Spatian Gate looms above me through the blizzard of tickertape.

That was a kind of damnation, one that I have never really come to terms with and never will. What awaits us here, tonight, is a more complete kind of damnation.

I call out to Carl, apologising and placating. 'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I'm sorry,' over and over again. Carl's anguished spectre vibrates itself into smoke with a wild frenzy, the last shreds of it burning and disincorporating into a thin sludge of acrid mist.

Once he is gone, the solar becalms and falls silent, apart from the buzz of the flies. Outside, the storm rages on, and we can hear other sounds in its cacophony. First, a purring roar, that comes and goes with the incessant thunder, and then an immense grinding sound, as if the hog's back peaks are writhing against one another.

'We've no choice but to flee,' says Molotch.

+I doubt Slyte will let us go. Even if we escaped this rock, where would we run to? Slyte's reach will be considerable.+

Molotch looks at me. I can tell his mind is still racing. I can also tell it is churning nothing but frustration and helplessness.

Angharad turns, raising her sword. Figures are grouped behind us in the terrace doors, framed by the flapping drapes. Belknap and Kara support the wounded Maud Plyton between them.

'Ravenor?' Belknap utters in surprise.

‘Oh gods!’ Plyton gasps. Her mind is a seething knot of pain, but I feel her intense relief through it. The unexpected sight of me gives her hope for a moment.

‘It’s good to see you, all three of you,’ I say.

A bow-wave of almost unbearable emotion swamps my mind. Kara runs forwards, leaving Belknap to support Plyton, and falls across the front of my chair, hugging it tightly. She is weeping.

+Kara.+

‘You’re alive!’

+Kara.+

She is inconsolable. I try to soothe her, but someone has hurt her. Someone has imprisoned her and tortured her. My poor Kara. There are so many things in her mind: grief, joy, relief, surprise, love, shame. She believed me to be dead and she can barely deal with the fact that I am not.

+Kara, it’s all right. Kara, who did this to you?+

She clutches my chair tighter, her tears leaking out over the metal casing. ‘I’m sorry!’ she wails. ‘I’m sorry!’

+Hush, Kara. It will be all right. Who did this to you?+

I reach into her unguarded, fragile mind to see, to soothe. Culzean had a hand in this. Behind him, I see an older memory of Siskind and Worna, and blanch at the inhuman desecrations they performed.

+I will find Siskind, I promise, Kara, and I will—+

I stop. Behind the toxic memories of Siskind and the brute Worna, other figures lurk: Carl, and Kara herself.

I read her deepest secret self, the white hot centre of her torment.

+Oh, Kara.+

‘I’m sorry, Gideon!’

‘What is she talking about?’ Belknap demands. His love and concern for her burn like a molten ingot in mind space. He sets Plyton down on a couch and comes over. ‘Kara? Ravenor? What?’

‘I knew it was Carl! I knew it, and I hid it!’ she wails.

‘Carl blocked your memories,’ I say. ‘I can see the scars.’

She looks up at me. ‘Before that. I knew. I knew and I hid it. He made me promise not to tell you. He made me promise not to tell anyone. He just needed time—’ She wails again and becomes incoherent.

‘What is she saying?’ Belknap asks me.

‘When did you know?’ I ask. ‘Kara, when did you know?’

‘Eustis Majoris. At the Sacristy.’

‘She was there,’ says Molotch softly. ‘She must have seen it all.’

‘Why did you hide it? Why didn’t you tell me?’ I ask.

‘I owed him so much,’ she murmurs. ‘He cured my... I was dying. He cured me. He saved me. He begged me to keep his secret for just a few months, to give him time to study, to find a way to beat it. I couldn’t say no. He saved me. What kind of daemon does that?’

‘The cunning kind,’ I reply, ‘and that’s the only kind there is.’

‘But—’ she begins.

‘You knew?’ asks Belknap.

‘What?’

‘You knew? You knew Thonius was the daemon and you covered for him?’

Belknap takes a step back from us. He is a man of strong, simple emotions. What I read in him now is revulsion and betrayal. It is painful, and total. Everything he is thinking and feeling is driven by his focused devotion to the holy God-Emperor. It is the cruellest and ugliest emotion I believe I have ever read, made crueller and uglier because it is sincere.

‘He saved me!’ Kara stammers, looking up at Belknap with tear-reddened eyes.

‘A daemon saved you?’ he replies. For a moment, I fear he is going to strike her. I take no chances. I shove him back with my mind and make him sit down on the couch beside Maud.

‘Sit down,’ I instruct him. ‘I will deal with this.’

‘But she—’

‘Sit down, Belknap, and shut up!’

‘I’d do as he suggests, if I were you,’ says Molotch. A smile curls his asymmetric lips. Even now, despite the dire circumstances, he can’t stop himself from enjoying the ruin this whole affair has reduced my people to.

‘And why the frig would anyone ever listen to anything you have to say, Molotch?’

Eight needle-sharp kine-blades hover in a spread, less than a finger’s length from Molotch’s pale face. He swallows. The solar’s end door is open, and Nayl stands there, aiming his autopistol down the length of the chamber at Molotch. Nayl is battered and hurt, one eye half-closed and swollen. Patience stands beside him, murderous concentration on her face.

‘Oh look,’ says Molotch, with fake enthusiasm. ‘They’re all here.’

+Let him be.+

‘Gideon?’ Kys questions, hesitantly.

+Let him be! Harlon, put away your gun!+

‘What’s he doing here?’ Kys asks.

I pull her kine-blades away from Molotch’s face and discard them on the floor.+The same as us, trying to live until tomorrow. We have pooled our resources.+

‘I hope the frig you know what you’re doing,’ says Kys.

She hurries to Kara and holds her, peeling her off my chair. Nayl crosses to Angharad and they embrace, kissing.

‘So,’ says Plyton from the couch, with an enforced brightness to mask her pain, ‘we got a plan yet?’

‘No,’ Molotch and I answer together.

The mountains shake. Elmingard shudders. A roar comes out of the night, so loud and throaty it bruises our souls. It is part scream, part wail, part howl, part bellow, a drawn-out ululation of huge volume that blots out the fury of the storm.

It is the roar of a predator, the voice of a billion billion-year-old predator that has just woken, and realised it is hungry.



FOURTEEN

KARA ROSE TO her feet, breaking Kys's embrace. She wiped her cheeks. She dared not glance at Belknap for fear of seeing the look in his eyes.

'Get out of here,' she said. 'Get everyone out of here, Gideon.'

'Kara—'

'Get out of here while you still can, all of you. I'll—'

'You'll do what?' Ravenor asked.

'I'll hold him back, as long as I can.'

'How?' asked Kys.

'I'll talk to him. I'll talk to Carl. He trusts me. I can slow him down.'

'No,' said Ravenor. 'I've already spoken to him. Carl is trying his best, but he's lost to us. Any tenuous control he once had has gone. He's dead and Slyte is in control. In full control.'

'Gideon is correct,' mumbled Culzean, propped up against the foot of the chest of drawers, his life's collection of precious papers littered around him, scorched. 'I've seen Slyte. Like a mockery of Thonius, using his form, twisting it. Such power, such radiance.' He brushed flies away from his face. His skin had taken on the pallor of a corpse. He was sitting in a puddle of his own blood.

'That wasn't Slyte,' sneered Molotch. 'That was just Slyte's way in, his harbinger, like a limb extended through a door. Thonius, powers rest his soul, is Slyte's conduit. What we saw in the Sacristy that night, Orfeo, and what you undoubtedly witnessed tonight, was just the tip of the iceberg. You know what an iceberg is, don't you Orfeo?'

'Of course.'

'Thonius is just the gate. The rest is coming through.'

The awful, primordial roar shook the room again. The flies billowed up.

‘Listen,’ said Molotch, almost enraptured by the sounds of the warp.
‘Here it comes.’

‘Let me try, Gideon,’ said Kara. ‘Please, let me try to talk to him.’

‘No, Kara,’ Ravenor replied.

‘Please! Let me—’

Without warning, she went into some kind of shock, and collapsed across the front of his chair, her limbs spasming. Kys tried to hold her steady. Despite himself, Belknap rose to help.

‘I’ve got her,’ Kys told him.

Gideon, Kara’s mouth said.

Kys pulled back, unnerved. Kara rose, her eyes closed. Ravenor knew at once that someone, *something*, was waring her.

Gideon. Please. This is my last chance.

‘There is no last chance, Carl,’ Ravenor said. ‘I’ve explained this to you. Let Kara go.’

Oh, please, you don’t understand. Kara’s mouth moved slackly, as if language was an alien, unfamiliar material passing through it. The blow flies settled on her face in increasing numbers, and scurried in and out of her mouth. They covered her eyes like scabs. *I only have a few moments left. I’m hanging on by my fingertips. He’s eating me, Gideon, he’s eating me up I*

‘I can’t help you, Carl.’

You bastard! You bastard! Kara Swole’s mouth cried. All the years I served you, and this is how you repay me? Save me! Save me!

‘For Throne’s sake!’ cried Nayl. ‘Do something!’

‘Can’t you help him, Gideon?’ demanded Patience Kys. ‘Please!’

‘I can’t,’ said Ravenor simply. ‘I can’t and I shouldn’t, and I won’t.’

Everyone stared at him, even Molotch.

Then kill it! Kill me! Banish it! Banish it! Give me peace!

Kara Swole swayed. Crawling flies covered her from head to toe.

‘We can’t banish it. We haven’t the means, and this location is not right for—’

Don’t be such an idiot! Of course you have the means! You brought a hole in the warp here with you! You can make this the right time and place!

Ravenor paused. Revelation seeped through him. He looked at Thonius’s unwilling avatar in grief and gratitude.+Oh Carl. The things you know.+

Manic laughter filled the air. As one, the flies lifted off Kara and she fell heavily onto the solar floor.

‘Help her, Patience,’ Ravenor voxsponded. He turned to Molotch.+The door. He means the door, Zygmunt. We can make our own damn rift!+

Wonder crossed Molotch’s face. ‘Oh, of course,’ he said. Then he frowned. ‘You brought that thing here?’

+Yes.+

‘There’s preparation time, you realise—’ Molotch began.

+Get what you need.+

Molotch hurried to the far end of the room and began a violent search of Culzean’s collection. He found a small leather case and started to fill it with parchments and other objects.

Ravenor turned to Kys. ‘Does your link still work?’ he asked.

‘I think so.’

‘Call to Sholto and request his aid. If he doesn’t want to come, tell him I understand. We’ll do this anyway.’

She nodded.

‘Get everyone down onto the landing and tell him, if he’s willing, to meet us there.’

‘Let’s go!’ she cried. She scooped up Kara and headed for the terrace doors. Belknap gathered Plyton to himself and, despite her protests of pain, headed out into the storm.

Nayl, his weapon in his hand, remained beside Ravenor.

‘You too, Harlon.’

‘I’m fine where I am,’ he replied.

‘What about me?’ Culzean whined.

‘Angharad?’ Ravenor directed.

‘Do I have to?’ the Carthaen asked sourly.

‘Please.’

Angharad sheathed Evisorex in her cross-shoulder scabbard and walked across to Culzean. He squealed as she lifted him.

‘Shut up.’

He didn’t. He couldn’t. Blood dribbled out of him. She carried him like a leaking sack back towards the terrace doors.

‘Molotch?’ Ravenor called.

‘Almost there, almost.’ Molotch stopped riffling through the junk and looked back at Ravenor. ‘I know this won’t make you very happy, but we’ll need blood, human blood.’

Ravenor psyked up an unbroken saucer from the floor and held it under Culzean. It filled quickly.

‘Making use of available resources,’ Molotch smiled. ‘How very practical.’

He paused. He looked up at the end wall of the solar behind him.

‘Oh shit—’ he started to say.

The windows blew in like grenade blasts. Rain and wind swirled into the room. The lamps went out. The ancient predator roared again, the concussive force of its voice shaking everything. They could all hear the distant, gigantic grinding sound, like cliffs scraping against cliffs.

Molotch staggered backwards, clutching the leather case.

The solar’s end door swung open and red light shone in. The thing that had been Thonius entered, naked, lit from within, fire flaring in its mouth. Its bare, black arm swung, weighted by its bunched talons. A carpet of cockroaches and other iridescent black beetles scuttled into the solar around its feet. Backing rapidly away from the daemon, Molotch slipped on the scurrying insects and fell.

Slyte approached him, grinning. Its talons rippled out.

‘Move!’ Nayl urged, heading for the terrace doors. ‘Leave him!’

‘We can’t go without Molotch! He has everything we need!’

Angharad dropped Culzean on the floor. The facilitator screamed. Sweeping out her sabre, she leapt between the daemon and the fallen heretic. Nayl yelled out her name. He opened fire at the glowing figure. Ravenor’s chair started firing at it too. The heavy rounds bounced off the burning, black-taloned thing.

Angharad’s sword did not. She took off its head in one stroke. Pressurised black ichor squirted up out of the severed neck with such force it splattered the ceiling. The thing clawed at her with its jet-black hooks. She took its bone arm off, and then cut it entirely in half.

‘Evisorex thirsts!’ she cried as the daemon fell apart, reducing to dust, its red glow evaporating.

‘You see?’ Angharad said, cocky with triumph. ‘Sometimes a good sword is all you need.’

Behind her, Molotch clambered to his feet. ‘You stupid bitch. Weren’t you listening? That wasn’t Slyte. *That’s* Slyte.’

The entire end wall of the solar collapsed, brought down by an advancing cliff of wet beige flesh. Mottled, lumpen tentacles reached out, flapping and snaking, from the gigantic mass. Some ended in sucker mouths, foul beaks of clear cartilage that snapped and yawned. Others were tipped by what looked like grasping human fingers. Vast, oozing orifices opened and closed between the roots of the whipping tentacles, and black-tipped transparent teeth, like giant quills, interlaced and clattered. Fetid gases exhaled through the pulsing orifices. The daemon-bulk stank of spoiled meat and disease.

The solar gradually disintegrated, its walls giving way under the crushing weight.

Angharad slashed her blade at a suppurating wall of daemoniac flesh three times her height. She tore huge gouges into the bruised, glistening meat, and sheared off several tusks and tentacles. Wretched brown ichor gushed out of the wounds.

Nayl yelled her name again, firing his weapon. Molotch was already fleeing, Ravenor was backing rapidly out through the collapsing frame of the terrace doors. Culzean, lying in the path of the monster, scrambled helplessly.

He squealed as the first of the dripping worm-limbs found him. They seized him with their beaks and suckers, and constricted around his body. Their touch spread virile corruption. Accelerated decomposition overtook Orfeo Culzean while he was still alive. He rotted in seconds and dissolved into a mass of wriggling worms and maggots.

Another writhing tendril, as fat as a man's arm and as white as a sea-floor mollusc, snapped around Angharad's neck and snatched her off her feet. She was sucked into one of the open maws in a single, gurgling inhalation. The flailing, pallid tentacles around the gulping orifice suddenly flushed bright red.

Evisorex clattered to the floor.

Nayl, in blind rage, ran forwards to where she had been standing a second before. He took up the fallen blade and hacked at the shuddering bulk, as if he could somehow cut it open and drag her back out.

Ravenor had moved clear of the collapsing chamber out onto the terrace. Molotch was with him, holding the leather case to his chest.

'Go, Zygmunt. Make things ready,' Ravenor said.

Molotch nodded and ran off down the terrace steps. Ravenor looked back.
+Harlon!+

Nayl just yowled back in answer, chopping with the sabre. He couldn't see what Ravenor could see.

The towering wall of daemon flesh ploughing through the solar was just a small part of a vast mass manifesting on top of Elmingard, a mountain of infected meat, growing all the time. Towers and roofs collapsed under it. In the sheeting rain, it was hard to define any real detail of the mass except for the black, blistered bulk of it. lagged tusks, as big as tree trunks, covered its upper flanks like battlements. Vast pseudopods, hundreds of metres long and dozens in girth, rippled and danced up into the sky above

from the apex of the mass. The cyclone of storm clouds, many kilometres across, rotated around the dancing limbs like a crown.

Ravenor gazed up at the abomination the warp had disgorged onto Elmingard.

‘Oh Throne help us,’ he said.



FIFTEEN

‘STOP,’ PLEADED IOSOB. ‘Stop it. Stop it. It’s making my head hurt.’ ‘Shut up,’ said Molotch. ‘Stop. Make him stop. Kys, make him stop.’ The girl looked up at Patience. ‘Please.’ ‘Shhhhh...’ said Kys. ‘It’s all right.’

‘But he’s spoiling my door. He’s spoiling it.’

‘He has to do this,’ Kys told her softly.

Molotch was using a stick of chalk to inscribe runes and patterns on the door and the wall around it. He’d already got Kys to hold one end of a length of twine so that he could measure out distances along the wall and the wet flagstones and mark them out accurately.

He was working furiously, copying certain symbols from sheets of parchment that were beginning to disintegrate in the driving rain. The symbols were ugly. Kys didn’t want to look at them. They made her skin crawl. She stayed at his side, however, because the only alternative was to look up at the gargantuan horror bestriding Elmingard, and that was a far more disturbing prospect.

‘Are you done yet?’ she asked.

‘I’m going as fast as I can,’ Molotch replied. ‘There is a degree of precision required. This can’t be rushed. You want it to work, don’t you?’

‘I’m not sure what I want any more,’ said Kys.

Molotch patiently scratched with the tip of his chalk stub. ‘This is an art. One rune imprecisely drawn, one sigil out of alignment... that would doom us to failure.’

She didn’t reply. Molotch looked up at her. ‘I often think of “Lynta”, you know.’

‘Don’t.’

‘I was very fond of “Lynta”. She was with me for about a year. Yes, I was very fond of her, until I discovered that “Lynta” had infiltrated my team to betray me, and that her actual name was Patience Kys.’

‘I won’t tell you again. Get on with your work, Molotch.’

‘It was Zenta Malhyde. 397.M41. You were very good. Very, very good. The things you did to convince me you were loyal.’

‘Shut up.’ Kys spat. ‘Shut your damn mouth!’

‘All your efforts and sacrifices were for nothing.’ Molotch smiled. ‘Because although you and Thonius, and Kara and Nayl tore my team apart and left me for dead, I survived, as I always survive. I imagine that must have been hard to live with afterwards, “Lynta”.’

A kineblade was suddenly hovering, trembling, a thumb’s length from his left eye. ‘Why?’ Kys snarled through clenched teeth. ‘Why the hell would you try to goad me like this?’

‘My dear, if this all goes wrong, I want to be sure you’ll kill me quickly.’

‘Finish your work!’ she cried. Molotch shrugged and got busy with his chalk stick again. Another primordial roar rent the air. They felt the deep vibration of it in their chests. Iosob yelped. Insect vermin, black and whiskered, had begun to spill down the wall from above. A river of them ran down the nearby steps. Kys pulled Iosob to her. She stamped on a few of the bugs milling around her feet.

Ravenor appeared at last, soaring down the steps to join them. Nayl stumbled after him. Kys could both see and feel that Ravenor was waring Nayl. That was almost unheard of. The wraithbone pendant around Nayl’s neck was glowing. He held the Carthaen’s sabre in his hands.

‘Are we ready?’ Ravenor asked.

‘Nearly,’ Molotch replied.

‘Where are the others?’

Kys gestured beyond the monastic wall. Out on the landing, a lander’s thrusters growled.

‘They’re boarding the lander. Sholto came.’

‘Good,’ said Ravenor.

They all looked up as the bulk of Slyte roared again. It was a deep, atonal blast, like the blaring warhorn of savage gods. The huge, snaking tentacles of the titanic abomination had begun to flop down over the sides of the Elmingard cliffs and reach around. Swelling black flesh bulged over the crushed palace. The smell was intolerable. Terraces crumpled and gave way under Slyte’s putrescent folds.

+Harlon, I’m going to release you. Don’t be a liability.+

Nayl’s figure shivered and hunched slightly as Ravenor’s mind let him go. His knuckles whitened around the hilt of Evisorex and he uttered a terrible, heartbreaking moan.

‘She’s gone. I’m sorry, Harlon.’ Ravenor said.

Nayl didn’t reply. He was shaking.

‘There was nothing we could have done.’

Nayl nodded slowly, as if he understood, but Kys could see nothing left in him of the strong, vital man she knew.

‘I’m done,’ said Molotch, turning to face them and flicking a cockroach off his sleeve, ‘except for the blood, of course.’

The bowl of Culzean’s blood had long since been lost in the mayhem.

Harlon Nayl, without hesitation, raised Evisorex. He slid his left hand along its length. Blood ran from his sliced palm.

‘Use this,’ he told Molotch.

They stood and waited while Molotch anointed the door with Nayl’s blood. The red smudges immediately began to dilute in the rain.

‘Key, young lady?’ Molotch said to Iosob. Pouting reluctantly, she handed it to Molotch, and he fitted it into the lock.

‘Now we should leave, if we’re ever going to leave,’ said Molotch.

They headed out through the wall arch onto the landing. Sholto’s craft sat waiting for them, its engines throbbing impatiently. Kys could see Unwerth’s concerned face in the glow of the instrumentation, watching for them through the cockpit window.

Kys, Iosob and Nayl clambered aboard.

‘Is there not some incantation?’ Ravenor asked as he and Molotch stood beside the waiting craft.

‘Incantation?’ Molotch laughed.

‘I don’t, I’m happy to say, know much about these things. I assumed there would be some words to speak, some ritual.’

Molotch giggled. ‘What a strange notion your kind has of mine, Gideon. You picture us all, sheltered away on our covens, mumbling arcane phrases from decrepit tomes for the adulation of our masters.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Ravenor. ‘I assumed—’

‘Actually, there is,’ said Molotch, holding out a shred of parchment, ‘and I want you to say it.’



SIXTEEN

RAVENOR SPOKE THE words, reading them from the paper Molotch held out in front of him. The blasphemy of them choked him, and polluted him. Every word was a taste of venom. He allowed Molotch this moment of triumph.

‘That wasn’t so hard now, was it?’ Molotch asked.

‘It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,’ Ravenor replied, truthfully. ‘You are an irredeemable bastard, Molotch. I think I might leave you here.’

‘That would just be unsporting,’ said Molotch.

‘It simply delays the inevitable.’

‘Then let’s delay it. Who knows, there may not be an inevitable anything.’

They boarded and closed the hatch. ‘Master Unwerth,’ Ravenor called, ‘if you please!’

THE LANDER LIFTED, jets straining, into the night. Wind shear punished them, and threatened to dash them into the cliff or the surrounding mountains. Unwerth cursed, fighting the stick. Kys moved into the cockpit, and used her telekinetic strength to help him lever back the controls.

They rose into the storm, ailing and wrenching. Behind them, Elmingard had gone. Occupying its clifftop site like a nest, the vast, rugose mass of black flesh and flailing pseudopods roared and quivered.

‘Now!’ Molotch yelled over the wall of the struggling thrusters. ‘It has to be now!’

‘We’re still too close,’ Ravenor replied.

‘Better too close than too late.’ said Molotch.

Ravenor lashed out with his mind. He reached back down into the filthy hell pit, his mind blistering and curdling as it was forced to extend into the warping maelstrom. It was like dipping his arm into a boiling cauldron to reach something at the bottom. He yelled out in pain.

He saw the door. The pustular folds of Slyte's distending form had almost crushed it. The old monastic wall had toppled, pushed out by the daemon's stinking girth. Ravenor lunged for the door, for the key in the lock.

It was white-hot. He screamed again. It wouldn't turn.

The lander jolted violently as a flailing tentacle struck it. They dipped and almost inverted. Dozens of alarm warnings began to shrill. Unwerth cried out with rage as he fought to right them again.

He brought them true, the thrusters maxing out at the limit of their power. Ice caked the front ports. Blow flies hatched from nowhere in their thousands and buzzed around the compartment. Iosob shrieked. Every metallic surface and object in the lander blackened and tarnished. The wounds Plyton and Nayl had taken suddenly began to bleed again. Belknap tried to staunch them. Kara's nostrils spurted blood, and she fell back in her seat.

'Damn it, and we were so close,' Molotch said, flapping the flies away from his face.

'The Emperor protects,' said Ravenor.

He took hold of the key. He turned it. The door opened.

The door opened into a bright, cold, white void that was somehow more hideous and terrible than the blackness and the daemon, and the storm. The light poured out, alien and sterile. The marks Molotch had painstakingly inscribed around the doorway lit up like phosphorescent flares, burning down into the stone despite the rain. Straight lines of dazzling white power linked them together like las beams, shooting from one to another until a geometric web of frosty light surrounded the open door.

The old wooden door caught fire. Its frame combusted and burned. As it came apart in flames, the awful white light on the other side escaped,

fracturing beyond the destroyed doorway and then out past the geometric web itself. A jagged white gash tore across the ground and up through the wall. It spread and split, faster and wider and longer.

A vast fissure of cold white light opened across the black rock of Elmingard.

There was a second of silence followed by a nuclear blink and a false dawn brighter than the sun.

The Kell Mountains ceased to be. They were sucked back into nothingness as the warp engulfed them and dragged them in. The gigantic storm was swallowed up along with them like ink in water, spinning down a drain. The night side of Gudrun lit up as clear as day.

A shockwave front two kilometres deep slammed out from the event across the countryside of Sarre.

It caught the tiny craft struggling to escape its wrath and hurled it, tumbling, from the sky.



AFTER

Thracian Primaris, 405.M41

I SIT IN the shadows of the cloister outside the hearing rooms. They will call me again soon, for the next round of questioning. I have lost count of the days now: thirty-one, thirty-two? My pardoner will know.

The court appointed him to me. His name is Culitch, an aspiring interrogator. He is reasonably efficient. As I go over the details with him in our briefings, his eyes widen as if I am telling him tall stories. He marks my comments down on his data-slate and wonders how he is going to recount them in open court without ridicule.

I wish him good luck.

My Lord Rorken still refuses to talk to me. I can understand his anger, although I had hoped he would affirm my actions without recourse to a formal hearing. His advisors privately assure me this is just for show, and that Lord Rorken is obliged to follow correct process. I am not so sure.

So, I sit in the chilly cloisters of the Palace of the Inquisition day after day. I have become used to its menacing, shadowy halls and unforgiving black marble floors. Inquisitorial guardsmen in burgundy armour, carrying their double-handed powerblades upright before them, stalk past from time to time, escorting solemn men and women in grim robes. They pretend not to look at me. They know who I am.

The rogue, the radical who saved Eustis Majoris by crippling it, and who spared Gudrun by wasting an entire province. Rogue, rogue, *rogue*.

I sit and wait for the next session to begin. My elders and betters will determine my fate. I trust they will make a good decision.

Footsteps approach. I assume it's Culitch, but then I recognise the limp and the clack of the walking stick.

'Hello,' says Maud, sitting down on the stone bench beside me. She leans her stick against the armrest. She is young and strong, and still healing. Her arm is in a sling. There is a smile on her face.

'How are we today?' she asks breezily.

'Fine. Did you find it?'

She nods. She has papers in her hand. 'At last. Took me ages. The archives are immense, and I was going back a long way. The prefects thought I was mad to be searching for something so distant and insignificant.'

'But you found it?'

'Of course I did. Say what you like about the Munitorum, but they keep the most thorough records. Besides, I'm a detective. What was that, was that a laugh?'

'Yes.'

'All right then. Sometimes your voice box makes damn funny sounds.'

'I laughed, Maud.'

It's good to have her with me. I appreciate her loyalty. Most of my friends are gone now, some for ever. Nayl said his goodbyes to me two weeks ago. He was bound for Carthe, intending to return Evisorex to the clan. He was brooding and quiet. I doubt he will ever return.

Zael and Frauka left last week, in the care of Inquisitor Lilith. She took Iosob with her too. They will all be tested and processed. I think Lilith will be compassionate, but I entertain no real hopes of seeing any of them again.

Kara, my dear Kara, remains under arrest. They are keeping her here, somewhere. Her hearing will follow mine, and I hope by the Emperor's grace I will be there to testify for her. She doesn't deserve this.

Belknap took passage to Eustis Majoris while we were still on Gudrun, the day before I turned myself over to Lilith. There was nothing to be said.

He was a noble man, but his heart was broken by the strength of his faith.

As for Unwerth and Preest, I have had no word from either of them. I wish them well in whatever voyages they undertake.

And Kys. Kys haunts the dining houses of the hive, loitering quietly waiting for me to be exonerated. I have no idea what she will do if the Inquisition demands my incarceration or death. I wish she would come and see me.

‘So d’you want to hear this or not?’ Plyton asks, ‘after all the bloody effort I went to.’

‘Tell me, please.’

She shuffles the papers. ‘Rahjez, Fantomine sub. 404, M.40.’

‘Go on.’

‘Listening Station Arethusa. Service personnel. Service records for Bashesvili, Ludmilla. It... uhm... it lists her as deceased that year.’

‘Was there a raid?’

‘No. No actions reported until 405. The records suggest she was—’

‘Executed,’ I finish.

‘For treason, I think.’

The ku-kud bristles and whispers. Iosob has opened the door.

‘Will you come with us?’ I ask.

Bashesvili shivers. ‘Oh, no, Gideon, I don’t think so. The far future frightens me. I think I’ll be safer here.’

‘I owe you everything. If this works, the far future you’re so unsure of will owe you a great debt too.’

‘Go and do what you have to do, Gideon. It sounds important.’

‘Goodbye, Ludmilla.’

I HEAR FOOTSTEPS. It is Culitch. ‘Sir, the hearings are about to recommence. Are you ready?’

‘Yes, young man.’

He walks towards the heavy doors and waits for me to join him. A session bell is ringing

‘I’m coming,’ I tell him. ‘Thank you for your work, Maud. I needed to know.’

Plyton rises, leaning on her stick.

‘I’ll wait here until you get out,’ she says.



THEN

Sarte Province, Gudrun, 404.M41

THE LANDER WAS a broken, buckled mass of wreckage. It had impacted in a bare field eighteen kilometres away from the epicentre, cutting itself a sixty-metre long gouge in the earth before coming to rest.

Steam and smoke rose from the crumpled shape. Right until the last moment, Unwerth had fought to bring them in safely. His skills had prevented them from simply crashing into the ground. Even so, it had not been a comfortable touchdown.

Most of the passengers were unconscious. Vapour hissed, and lubricant dripped from torn hoses.

Molotch clambered out onto the dry straw of the field. The crash had broken several of his ribs, and they ground together as he moved.

‘Ow,’ he said. ‘Ow, shit. That hurts.’

He began to stagger away across the parched fields. The sky was a threaded grey of pre-dawn. To the north, where the Kells had once stood, an immense pall of black smoke hung like a shadow.

RAVENOR CAUGHT UP with him several fields away, near a small wood. The trees in the wood had been stripped of their leaves by the aftershock. Molotch had come to a halt, leaning against the bars of a broken gate. He was breathing hard and clutching his ribs. His face was drawn and bloodless.

He looked up as Ravenor glided towards him, and laughed sadly. Laughing made him wince.

‘I can’t run any more,’ he said, pain colouring his voice.

‘That’s good. I’m tired of chasing you.’

Molotch nodded. ‘This is the inevitable bit we were talking about, isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ said Ravenor, and reached out into Molotch’s mind. Zygmunt Molotch did not put up a fight.

When the others caught up with them, Molotch was lying on the ground beside the gate. Ravenor felt Kys approaching, with Kara close behind her. Behind them, a little further off, Nayl was limping across the stubbled field.

They drew close and halted, staring at the corpse beside the gate. In death, Molotch seemed a pathetic and insignificant thing, not at all the sort of being that should have required decades of devotion, sacrifice and effort to bring down.

+I told you closure was overrated.+

Kara nodded. ‘It’s still closure,’ she said.